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The current generation of consoles are causing a lot of huff and puff. A week doesn't go by at this point where executives from Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo don't have something to say about their consoles. The majority is coming from Sony, doing damage control after a less-than-enthusiastic response at E3. Soon extra bits, such as the PS3 being a computer and making money from digital content delivery, started to surface. Developers and publishers are also coming out of the woodwork, giving support for or complaining about this or that console. Right now the only one getting a pretty fair hand is the 360, because it's already in the market. Nintendo has been taking advantage of its E3 hype, dropping details here and there about what players can expect from the Wii. Sony's problem is that all the news it is talking about now should be exciting, but it didn't get a huge boost out of E3. Still, it's far from over for the console range that has sold millions upon millions of units. The PS2 is still the strongest selling console in the world, more than double that of the 360.

As such, ignore the noise around these consoles and try them for yourself before you buy. Or take our word for it when we write about them. The best is both – read what you can and then try it for yourself. rAge will be a good place to learn more. In his monthly column Michael James, the man behind the show, drops a few details on what you can expect. In fact, rAge is going bigger and bolder again, with more upcoming games on show, the next-gen consoles (though not confirmed, the 360 is pretty much a given to appear at rAge) and a huge 1,200 NAG LAN. This part gets its share of coverage in our Multiplayer section, where the basics of LAN etiquette are explained.

rAge aims to be a central point for gamers in South Africa, bringing the various cultures together and taking gaming to new audiences. The big brother of all game expos, E3, does the same thing even though it is technically a trade-only event. But no journalist sits in the Wii line for 6 hours unless his boss told him he must. Those were mostly fans. That just makes E3 bigger, noisier and more exciting. The result from our side is another E3 Supplement – the biggest yet with more than double the amount of games we included last year. Don't lose it!

In closing, this is our first-ever PSP cover. Wave it around when people complain that games are only about violence.

James Francis [Editor]

INBOX

LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: Stefaan Swarts
SUBJECT: Should we be keen on reviving old games?

I'm sure we all remember Billy Blaze, the eight-year-old genius with an IQ of 314. He was and still probably is the ultimate defender of the earth. Forget about rocket launchers and machine guns, about Slipgate warriors, gibbing Shamblers, Ch'ton and Marine forces battling vast numbers of Strogg. Forget about scary little girls with long hair covering their faces, leaving blood prints all over the place. Take the bounce down nostalgia lane... Good old *Commander Keen*, the little boy who wears his brother's football cap, bounces around on that legendary pogo stick and stuns aliens with his gun, making them disappear. Who can forget that dismal feeling as you just mistimed the mad mushroom's jump. Who can forget the panic, the utter anxiety as the dope fish barrels down towards you...?

Ten to sixteen years ago, the world of computer gaming was still an infant compared to the powerhouse body builder it is today. Game developers had very limited resources and much less technology to turn their ideas into computer games. Thus, games were simple and mostly 2D scrolling titles, like *Duke Nukem* and *Secret Agent Man* for instance. We remember them for the joy they brought us on our 33MHz PCs with the PC speaker bleeping away. Why would we want to desecrate these warm remembrances and go dig up old titles to revive them?

What's done is done. There's no need to revive something if it has served its purpose. You wouldn't try and put new energy into an old alkaline battery would you? And even if you did try, you would've spent more time, money and effort on something that would still not work, and that you could have bought brand-new at the shop across the street.

Interestingly enough, we were discussing a Commander Keen remake the other day. The problem isn't really that old games are being remade – in one sense it introduces the history of games to a new generation that never knew about the XT, NES or Amiga. But a lot of developers seem to think they must improve on the original in a big way. The most common is to take an old side-scroller and make it a third-person action title. Metroid Prime (though an FPS) did this well as did Duke Nukem: Manhattan Project, but in general it creates a completely different game. Instead we'd like to see a new Flashback, still using vectors and side-scrolling levels, but on the 360 with nice, new visuals. Or Lost Vikings with network support. But all too often these remakes are either carbon-copy versions of the original (which, as you said, has been done) or throw the baby out with the bathwater and follow the original only in spirit.

TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:

Are non-gaming people around you playing games more and more?

FROM: \m'-ChArL-\m/
SUBJECT: Graphics and physics in the future

I wanted to e-mail you about something that has been on my mind for quite a while. If you look at *Half-Life* a couple of years ago and now look at *Half-Life 2*, there is absolutely no comparison at all. Which leads to my question: Will games in the future be very realistic, like in human life? Will graphics become so good it will consist of digital atoms and molecules instead of pixels? And will there be features like a digital human made like a life-like human. For example, every grain of hair placed on the head and face, running water and blood, organs in a digital human?

What do you think? Will technology for games be this good in our lifetime?

Around four years ago there was a story going around about a game engine that built its worlds with virtual molecules. This was a myth, obviously, because it's inefficient. If game designers made things exactly like in real life they'd, for example, carve all the textures into a wall instead of faking it with images and bump-mapping. The art of game technology is to create a system that mimics the real deal with as little effort as possible. So we are very unlikely to one day have game characters with full virtual blood and organs. That level of detail would only interest someone developing a medical sim. But we will one day have visuals that look as real as the real thing.

That much is obvious. The question is whether game graphics will aspire to try something else than just be realistic. With the powerful engines already on the market, there's a lot of space for some radical art styles. Unfortunately developers are still largely sticking to cartoons and life-like visuals. Imagine a game based on the art style of Dali or a comic title that looks very close to the art style in that comic. Wouldn't that be something to behold?

FROM: Abyssal Chaos
SUBJECT: What the heck is Sony thinking?

I've been following the news of the PS3, and I have just one question for the wonderful folks at Sony: What are they thinking? Are they seriously going to charge that much for the new machine? I mean, I know it's a highly advanced piece of technology, but that doesn't mean they can charge so much for it, does it? As big a supporter as I am of the PlayStation, I think if Sony tries to overcharge people I'm going to get an Xbox 360. It'll probably turn out to be a lot cheaper.

The Japanese agree with you. According to a Famitsu poll, nearly 80% of the gamers there think the PlayStation 3 is too expensive. But didn't Ken Katuragi say that people will want to work harder to own one? So far it doesn't look that way, especially since Blu-Ray isn't dead-certain to be the DVD-replacement format. Sony is taking a bit of a gamble here and only

"WILL GRAPHICS BECOME SO GOOD IT WILL CONSIST OF DIGITAL ATOMS AND MOLECULES INSTEAD OF PIXELS?"

time will tell if it will come off better for it. But as die-hard gamers, we'll end up owning all three the new consoles anyway. The same can't be said for the average gamer on the street.

FROM: X51-HellbirD-
SUBJECT: DotA

I must be honest, I've only recently started reading your mag, but I've been rather impressed. However I always wondered when the topic of DotA would arise. The article in your last mag was pretty harsh. It seems to suggest that more experienced players are aggressive towards new players. This is rather untrue. The writer mentioned he had only played for two months and here lies the problem. We all understand that you need to start somewhere and are generally tolerant, but when new players don't listen to more experienced players, generally not even replying to them, we become annoyed. DotA is a team game and you're as strong as your weakest member. The entire idea is to kill enemy heroes. When someone is getting "farmed" your enemies become far stronger and of course, thus making life difficult. However if new players tend to listen, they are at least useful.

As far as the topic of knowns and unknowns go, it's simply a means to protect our games. Unknowns tend to be users using Smurfs and are liable to quit games, which completely ruins it. However, I will admit that more experienced gamers tend to be quite harsh,

not generally to new players, but to each other. This is due to the intense rivalry generally involved in the South African clans.

But on a more supportive tone for your mag, maybe it is time that the more experienced DotA players start being a bit more friendly... And hey, teach a noob some tricks, you feel good about it afterwards... trust me!

That's the problem, isn't it? While pro and hardcore players deserve the pedestals they tend to get on, a lot of players forget that they started at the bottom as well. And while those players often got caught in the initial hype and fervour surrounding said game, the same doesn't apply to new players who are interested, but don't know how to play it. Top players must not forget that trial-and-error is part of learning how to play a game and every guy who screws up isn't doing it to mess up your game. In fact, complaining about that all the time is akin to always blaming your mouse for losing. But foremost, if there are not new players the game will eventually die. That said, new players need to remember that when they join a lot of these games they are guests and still need to gain the respect of the communities involved. Maybe everyone should count to ten before sending off flame remarks.

FROM: Anon
SUBJECT: DotA Bigots

On page 28 of the May issue, Anton Lines made the bold statement that the game hosts for DotA were fast becoming intolerant bigots and the community elitist. I unfortunately must agree with him.

I only started playing this game about two months ago when my boyfriend asked me along to a friend's house. I had never before played DotA, but had heard of it since my boyfriend and his friends usually attend the MPLD LAN events in Pretoria. At this friend's house we promptly set up space for seven of us and some others of their clan joined online. We then commenced playing.

This was the worst experience of my gaming life! It was the first time I had ever even seen the game and things didn't go as well as planned. After the game we stopped for a coffee break and everyone who was in my team was shouting at me for playing a poor game, including my boyfriend. I tried to explain that this was all new to me, but they promptly refused to play on the same team as me, and my glorious foray into the wonderful world of DotA was ended.

I have since practiced against the AI and online as well. But despite the fact that I am now able to actually play the game (since I've gained some experience), the one time that I struggled (being the first time that I played) is still being used against me whenever I broach the subject of joining them again. "You can come along to make the coffee" is usually the only response I get when asking if I should take my PC. I know it's frustrating when your team loses, but with four other experienced players, how much damage can one newbie who is still learning cause? Sure, everyone kind of sucks when they're a newbie. But if you won't let us play, how will we become the unstoppable heroes that everybody wants on their teams?

Where do we begin? Okay, first thing: if you can get your girlfriend interested in your lousy game with your boring geek friends and she's even practicing to get better, what's worse than going off on her because she's still learning the game you're obsessed with? Apart from a serious case of boyfriend retardation, the whole reaction is also exactly what's wrong with this kind of scene. The same thing happened to Counter-Strike – elitism and the need to win every game resulted in little to no tolerance for new and casual players. Whoever this guy is, you owe your girlfriend dinner, a massage and at least equal time playing the game she really enjoys, without the cumbersome addition of stupid players who can't think beyond their own mouse cursors.

FROM: Warren Pool
SUBJECT: Episodic games

Are episodic games the future of distribution? In my personal (and fully humble) opinion, yes and no. On the positive side you've got a new world of possibilities and features that can be explored. The new *SiN Episodes* that are now being released tickle me in ways which cannot be described. I was a HUGE fan of the original *SiN* and (dare I say it) preferred it to *Half-Life*. Despite the game being slightly buggy I still enjoyed it and the expansion. But back to the topic: episodic games can be positive and negative. Positive in the fact that customers can look forward to another action-packed instalment when the game ends in a crucial part of the story (kinda like TV shows) and that they can submit their own opinions and the developers can improve the next instalment, and perhaps even find a way to improve the story! On the negative, you could be caught in a trap like the Anime series, *Naruto* - a great and epic series at first, but when quantity of the episodes became

"HOW MUCH DAMAGE CAN ONE NEWBIE WHO IS STILL LEARNING CAUSE?'

"WHEN QUANTITY OF THE EPISODES BECAME APPARENT, SO DID THE QUALITY OF THE STORY"

apparent, so did the quality of the story. Eventually you just had filler episodes. BUT, I'm a positive person and fully support this new breath of life onto the gaming market! My full support to Ritual and I hope *SiN Episodes* will excite me as much as the first one!

That's a good point – will episodic games ever degrade to the point that we have filler episodes? That might happen sooner than later, but due to the concept still being quite early in its implementation, it's likely that the developers will initially try as hard as possible to keep their audiences happy. It's the proverbial "singing for your supper". Also, anime series tend to overextend themselves, partly because of the home video market in Japan. When you have a finely oiled animation factory to churn out regular material, it becomes easy to just keep stuffing more of the content into the market. For now, developing a game is technically more demanding (and risks being much less lucrative) than churning out episodes for a popular Japanese animation.

FROM: Melissa Steyn
SUBJECT: Miktar's Rant

Can someone please give Miktar a hug? I've been following Miktar's rant for the last few months, and it's utterly dismal. I don't want to offend him, but it's basically the same tired rant every month. Obviously the topics change, from "Miktar vs the world", "South African gamers suck", "You are all idiots for playing *World of Warcraft*", "Blizzard sucks" etc., but the writing is the same. It's terribly formulaic and not in the least bit entertaining. I definitely enjoy a nice rant every once in a while, but it really takes talent (and perhaps a little bit of time) to pull it off. If you don't get it right, you come across as an opinionated idiot with limited writing skill.

There's no question that Miktar is a diamond in the rough. It's clear from some of his forum posts (over the last few years) that Miktar is extremely funny, intelligent and entertaining. Just imagine if he allowed the real Miktar to shine (through his columns).

I'd just like to say, "Spice it up a little; show us your creative side and that you deserve to have your own opinion column".

Perhaps if the staff hugged Miktar more instead of ragging him over being a fan boy (and these days we call him a fan boy for anything, even sub sandwiches), his tone might lighten up and he will start writing pieces that engage the community instead of trying to rip them apart. But then we wouldn't get letters like this! **NAG**

BYTES

THE PS3
WHAT IS SONY UP TO?

THE MORE SONY REVEALS about its upcoming PlayStation 3, the more questions arise. That's par for the course, except that you want your console to attract positive attention. Right now Sony's strongest asset is the reputation of the PlayStation 2, one that it is clutching onto extensively. There is little doubt that the PlayStation 3 will do well when launched, but the company is likely to lose a lot of market share to Microsoft and Nintendo. Echoing this very statement was David Reeves, SCEE chief.

"The name of the game is not market share, it's how fast we can grow the industry - our ambition is to grow 15 percent a year on hardware and software if we can," Reeves told MCV. "We want to try and double digital entertainment in the next five to six years. Whether we have 40, 50, or 60 percent market share is not that important." Technically he's right, except that a fifteen percent yearly growth means taking someone's market share, as the game market itself hardly grows at that pace. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006 and 2007 can expect 14 and 22 percent growths worldwide respectively, mainly thanks to the console launches. After that it returns to the single digits. Market share and hardware growth are closely tied together and Sony might have started to realise that at $100 more than a 360, the PS3 has its work cut out for it.

The biggest shock from E3 was the pricing announcement. A standard PS3 will cost $499, the same as a 360 Premium edition (with the same capacity hard drive). The 60 gigabyte model costs $599. The difference is less than between the 360 Premium and Core, a wise move considering how unpopular the Core console has been. At the moment manual upgrading of the 360 drive isn't possible, though a device allowing external USB drives to be attached to the console is on its way.

It will take time for the PS3 to offer the same services, unless its hard drive can be upgraded easily. Only time will tell, but nearly 80 percent of Japanese gamers responding to a Famitsu poll said the price was too high.

The big problem for Sony is that the console, thanks to the Cell processor and Blu-Ray drive, is really expensive to manufacture. According to Merril Lynch, the PS3's manufacturing costs more than $715. If Sony reaches the four million mark within the first year of launch, it stands to lose over $1 billion. According to SCEA president Kaz Hirai the company hopes to ship six million. This means that if Sony doesn't want to end up in the deep red soon, it will need to make sure that the games are ready for sale as well.

This area has problems of its own. The development kits for a lot of games only showed up at a lot of development houses in this year, plus the complicated Cell processors are creating problems for developers because of unconventional hardware designs. The biggest blow for the PlayStation 3 was that the games on show at E3 were not close to the scripted demonstrations shown a year ago. There's little doubt that the PS3 has a lot of power behind it and can produce such visuals (quite evident on the on-rails shooter *8 Days*), but its reputation was one of being vastly more powerful than the 360. Unfortunately several developers, including Hideo Kojima, have stated that the 360 can do whatever the PS3 can – at least for now. So even if the PS3 has a performance advantage, it will only be obvious well into those single percentile growth years.

E3 2006 was a matter of the emperor's new clothes. The biggest piece of news that came from Sony's conference was not about the games or the new controller, but the high

price. The same lot befell Nokia when it unveiled the N-Gage's price to an unimpressed media gathering. Sony went back to basics and the PS3 controller is essentially the PS2 model, except it can now detect tilt and acceleration moments. Once again ambiguity reigns. Some developers say they were only shown the model weeks before E3 and the lack of games at the show supporting the feature could be indicative of this. Sony says that the design has been planned for a long time, but nothing was announced to protect patents. Whichever is true, the company did take a big step away from the boomerang controller shown last year and some feel that the PS2 controller, although it was popular, is inferior in design. If the PS3 controller isn't an afterthought, Sony hasn't done a lot to separate its look and feel from the PS2.

Nonetheless, a firm release date has been confirmed: 17 November. The 360 had a hard time keeping up with demand and didn't attempt a worldwide launch. Sony is though, so you can expect the console locally in mid-November, but in limited numbers. Unfortunately the local price has not been confirmed, but at the dollar price the console will cost R3,500 and R4,200 respectively. No launch titles or the price of games have been announced, and the online features of the PS3 are being kept hush as well. That's because Sony is taking a different gamble – that Blu-Ray will become the successor to DVD, making the PS3 a pricey but worthwhile buy, since it will support Blu-Ray and the top-end of HDTV resolutions. Unfortunately the format wars are far from resolved and are not likely to hasten themselves to endure the survival of a gaming console. In fact, it appears that the PS3 is Sony's vehicle for promoting Blu-Ray. Using an expensive console with its main feature being a new format to promote that very format is a dangerous gamble.

Meet the new controller, same as the old controller … more or less

SCEE President Howard Stringer denies that gaining market share is the main goal behind sales of the PS3

SNIPPETS
YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

Death Jr., the creepy/cute platformer on the PSP, is not only getting two new titles this year, but a Manga series as well. It will be created by Seven Seas.

Halo 2 has clocked over half a billion online games on Xbox Live. The game, launched in late 2004, has sold over seven million copies.

Left Behind Games, developer of apocalypse-themed strategy game **Left Behind**, has signed up game-ad company Double Fusion to provide the scenic ads in a futuristic New York City.

Uwe Boll has filed suit against **Bloodrayne** movie distributor Romar Entertainment, claiming breach of contract for not getting it into the allotted 2,000 cinemas. We should be thanking them...

NAG SURVEY WINNERS

Café Corner starter kit
William Marchant, Houghton

PSP Hamper
Kirsten McDowell, Sunninghill

Hardware Hamper
Johannes Zeeman, Weltevredenpark

Box of Crap from NAG
Andria Wilkins, Boksburg

24 Hot New Games
Morné Moolman, Port Elizabeth

NAUGHTY DOG DEMO "REAL-TIME"

DEVELOPER NAUGHTY DOG HAS gone on record to defend the footage shown at the Sony Conference this year. Audiences were more stunned than wowed when a lot of the titles shown at the conference, held just before E3, didn't live up to the supposed 'real-time' footage shown at the same conference last year. One of the stand-out examples was an edge demonstration for an unannounced game – one that looked so good that its authenticity came under fire.

"The entire trailer was rendered in real-time using our PS3 game engine," the developer's Evan Wells told IGN. "All of the models, textures, shaders and effects are in-game." The game met with the same criticism as *8 Days* and *The Getaway*, though the former was an on-rails shooter, allowing the developers a lot of leeway in creating spectacular visuals. Since events and elements such as physics can be pre-calculated, it doesn't strain the hardware resources nearly as much as in a user-controlled camera and motion title.

Speaking of cameras, Wells gave a bit more detail on the next game from the studio. Apparently it will be based in a jungle locale and is in third-person – Naughty Dog hired the designer behind the *Prince of Persia* cameras to work on this title. For the rest – and proof that what was shown is the real deal – we'll just have to wait. Unfortunately this means a new *Jak & Daxter* game isn't on the immediate horizon.

These visuals, according to Naughty Dog, are real-time on the PS3

'RULE OF ROSE' TOO EROTIC FOR AMERICA

*R*ULE OF ROSE IS a Japanese game that is being published by Sony in Japan. They have, however, opted out of publishing the game in the US. The reason stated is that the game's erotic undertones involving prepubescent girls is too much.

In an interview with *Gamasutra*, the game's director, Shuji Ishikawa, explained his motivations and why he thought there's nothing wrong with the game.

"Right, the erotic aspect you mentioned earlier isn't supposed to be the main theme. There are definitely erotic parts to it, and some things that might make people uncomfortable, but it's not the focus. It shouldn't be a problem. It's about intimate relationships between all people, not just children, not just girls. There will be people who don't understand it, but others will. And it won't be toned down for the West."

Publishing for the game in the US is to be handled by Atlus which seems to have no problem with the content.

Sony producer Yuya Takayama, when asked why Sony won't publish the game in the US, said: "How shall I say this... well, when Sony looked at the game, they felt it wasn't really in sync with their corporate image. Their personal pride wanted it to be a bit tamer, if it were to have the Sony name in the US. I personally appealed to them that it wasn't that kind of game, but it didn't quite work out for me."

MOTION-SENSING FINAL FANTASY

IT SEEMS THAT FINAL Fantasy XIII for the PlayStation 3 will make use of the motion-sensing technology that appeared earlier this year. In an interview, Square-Enix's Tetsuya Nomura revealed: "Yeah, we already have some ideas about how to use it."

Also from Square-Enix, Yoshinori Kitase noted that FFXIII was originally in development for the PlayStation 2, and the team only decided to go next-generation later.

The new battle system was also discussed in the interview with Website 1UP (www.1up.com), where it was mentioned that "… at first sight, it might seem like an action game, but FFXIII inherits the long tradition of the numbered FF games, which is the active-time battle command system."

"We are trying to use a similar system to what you've seen, but the major difference is that the battle will be speeded up considerably. In the past, you had to wait to input commands, but our goal here is to reduce that waiting time as much as possible, so that the battles are greatly speeded up."

From the team, Motomu Toriyama declined to reveal all the details of the game's new lead female protagonist.

"This time, one of the characteristics of this heroine is that she's not that feminine. I tried to make her someone very strong, independent. When I asked Mr Nomura to design this character, I requested someone like a female version of Cloud from FFVII."

TITANIC DIRECTOR CAMERON PLANNING MMO GAME/MOVIE

AT THE 2005 GAME Developers Conference, James Cameron was featured in a hyperbole montage for the then-unnamed next-generation console, now the Xbox 360. The director then mentioned he is working on "his next big-budget blockbuster, his first since 1997's Titanic, would be developed alongside a high-profile game".

"In my next film, I can only tell you what we're planning on doing, which is simultaneously developing a major motion picture and, hopefully, a major game title that coexists in the same world that shares characters," said Cameron. He continued, "Going into that world will actually inform those watching the film and vice versa."

Speaking with BusinessWeek earlier this year, Cameron said his next film was code-named "Project 880." Cameron admitted he was planning an MMO game that would tie into the film, which he would only describe as "completely crazy, balls-out sci-fi."

A casting notice for Project 880 states: "In the future, Jake, a paraplegic war veteran, is brought to another planet, Pandora, which is inhabited by the Na'vi, a humanoid race with their own language and culture. Those from Earth find themselves at odds with each other and the local culture."

HALF-LIFE MOVIE UNLIKELY
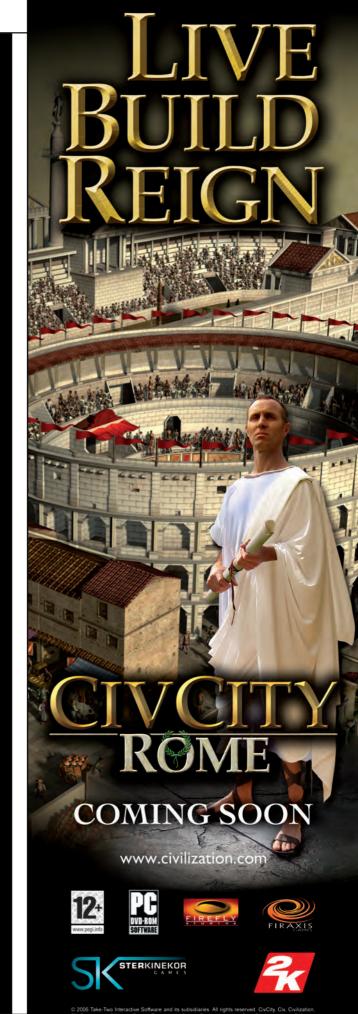
CO-FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR of Valve, Gabe Newell, has slammed Hollywood's attempts to take videogames from interactive to the non-interactive big screen. Gabe has gone on record to state that there will be no Half-Life movie unless a decent script is produced.

In an exclusive interview with Eurogamer, Newell said he made a point of going to see videogame movies, although not because of personal choice: "I have to put on my professional 'I'm doing this for the company' hat, not the 'I'm a movie goer whose soul is going to be crushed by another unbelievably crappy game adaptation' one."

"I just think that there's an attitude right now that they're trying to exploit the built-in audience of gamers right now and they don't really care whether the movies are any good."

Newell confirmed that several Half-Life movie scripts have been submitted for his approval, but said: "They all sucked. They're just bad movies - movies that shouldn't get made."

"I'm a huge fan of movies, I love going to movies and we have absolutely no reason to do it. It's not like they've offered us these giant buckets of cash and said 'let us go and ruin your game'. They offer you little tiny amounts of cash, so it's like they've not even tried to bribe us to go and make a bad movie... Unless it's a great movie, unless it's as exciting a movie as the game was, then it will never get made."

99 Nights, the Tetsuya Mizuguchi 360 exclusive, has finally been given a US release date. Western players can expect to get the action title in August, though no dates were given for other territories.

THQ lost its legal battle against The Tetris Co. to prevent Nintendo to publish the game on the DS. But it did secure the rights to release **Tetris** for the 360 in the US and Europe. You'd think the game would be public-domain by now.

Take Two has cancelled **Snow**, the drug-related management sim that was due later this year. No reason was given, but the publisher has been under a lot of government pressure since the Hot Coffee debacle.

DS LITE TAKES OVER THE WORLD

WHILE COMMENTATORS MUSE OVER the console wars, there is little argument over how successful Nintendo's DS handheld has been. This success continues in the re-designed DS Lite, a slightly smaller and much more ergonomic model. The Lite was released in Japan in the beginning of March and has since been in such demand that Nintendo shipped 700,000 units tot he market in April, all sold out before the month was over.

The Lite launched in mid-June in the U.S. to a lot of fanfare. Fans lined up out the Nintendo store in New York, hoping to get their hands on a unit. Some fans dressed up as Nintendo characters and the first 100 buyers got a free carry case and a copy of Brain Age. But the DS Lite has already been popular in the country when major retailers accidentally started to sell the Lite ahead of time. Confusing it with the normal DS unit, the Lite was sold at major retailers like Target and Walmart in late May already.

None of this has managed to dampen demand for the unit. In Japan the Lite's suggested retail price is JP¥16,800, but some retailers are selling it for as much as JP¥23,300 and auction sites have units available for up to JP¥40,000. In the U.S. the Lite and DS sell a the same price, $129.99, while Europeans can expect to pay £99.99 in the UK and €149.99 in the rest of the continent.

The house that Mario built is still going strong and so far not even Sony's PSP has come close to beating the DS' popularity. At E3 2006, Sony announced that it has shipped 17 million units. Nintendo, on the other hand, revealed that the DS has sold over 16 million units, excluding the Lite which has sold over 2 million units in Japan alone so far.

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

KING'S QUEST 1 (REMAKE)

URL: www.agdinteractive.com/KQ1.php
GENRE: Adventure
SIZE: Game (20.5 MB), Digital Music Pack (26.8 MB), Digital Speech Pack (2.89 MB)
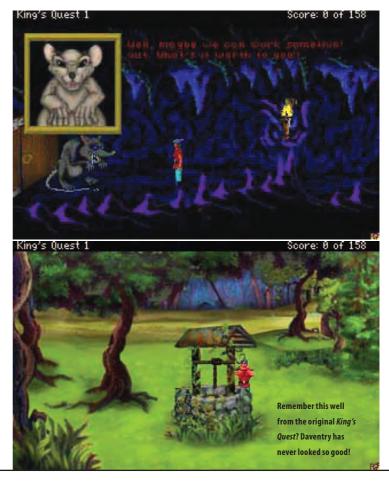
BACK IN 1984, ROBERTA Williams walked into a comic book store and asked the store owner to please sell her game for her, which was on a floppy disk inside a Ziploc sandwich bag.

Her game, *King's Quest: Quest for the Crown*, was quite revolutionary for its time and still epitomises the adventure gaming experience. The game was the first of its kind, and allowed the player to interact with an entirely 2.5D world. *King's Quest 1* (KQ1) is still regarded as the game that started the graphic adventure genre on the PC altogether.

A team of avid fans decided to remake *King's Quest 1*, complete with voice and music due to the lack of a retail version (or abandonware version due to legal constraints). Sierra attempted a remake back in 1990, using its newer SCI engine, but it was a market failure and only resulted in a loss of money, instead of inching out the last dregs of financial worth from the series. Anonymouse Game Developers (AGD), the team that developed this free remake, decided that an enhanced *King's Quest*, on par with Sierra's later *Quest for Glory* remake, was in order. Sierra seems to have not decided to squash the project, as all the characters and material, despite still being copyrighted by Sierra Entertainment, are used with permission.

So take a trip down nostalgia lane, or if you've never experienced point-and-click before, enjoy learning about where gaming came from and how it evolved over the years, with this remake of *King's Quest 1* (found on the Cover DVD).

Remember this well from the original King's Quest? Daventry has never looked so good!

A Wii FOR EVERYONE

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE Wii's momentum at E3, Nintendo executives have been talking a lot about the console and their plans. Saturo Iwata, Nintendo's President, spoke at a Japanese marketing event where he unveiled more details about the console. The console had already been confirmed at costing less than $250. Iwata revealed that the games for the Virtual Console, an emulator on the Wii that will let players buy and download games, will cost between $4.50 and $8.99. This is slightly less than what Microsoft charges for arcade games on its Live service ($5 to $10). Iwata also revealed that the DS will be able to connect to the Wii, which will allow users to copy and swap demos. He also hinted at the touch screen becoming a controller for the console, plus that some DS games will be playable on the Wii. Unfortunately Nintendo's implementation of GBA/GameCube connectivity fell flat, but the combination of the Wii's movement sensors and the DS's touch screen could change that. It remains to be seen what will happen. But Nintendo fans have every reason to look forward to the Wii's launch.

Excite Bike will soon return to your living room

FEDERAL JUDGE CAUGHT PLAYING SOLITAIRE

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS reported that Manhattan Federal Court Judge, Shira Scheindlin, was caught playing solitaire while overseeing an important case against John "Junior" Gotti.

The allegation comes from a radio host, Curtis Silwa, who noticed the errant gaming habits while testifying on the witness stand. Silwa was almost killed in a 1992 shooting that John Gotti is accused of having planned.

Silwa said he saw the judge playing solitaire during the last two trials, but didn't say anything "… until Scheindlin dumped cold water on the government's third try to convict the mobster. Silwa is requesting that Scheindlin step down from the case.

Earlier this year, Mayor Bloomberg from New York fired a low-paid office worker after coming across a game of solitaire left on the worker's desktop. Now comes the question of how a highly-paid judge with political connections is reprimanded (if at all) for her in-trial *faux pas*.

SEXUALITY-CENTRIC GAMING POLL

GRADUATE AND NON-GAMER JASON Rockwood has created a survey that tries to compare two different things. Its main idea is to look at how relationships (specifically homosexual ones) and gaming tie together, and where.

"People had talked about being gay and being a gamer, but nobody had asked them to unify those two elements, and people were excited about that," Rockwood said in an interview with In *Newsweekly*, New England's largest homosexual-orientated newspaper's Website.

Rockwood felt that creating a 91-question survey would best fulfil his desire for knowledge on the subject.

"First we need to prove that homosexual gamers even exist. Yeah it sounds ridiculous, but that's where you have to start on something like this. This survey is an attempt to quantify the existence of an invisible minority," said Rockwood. Unfortunately, Rockwood seems to be comparing apples to oranges.

Rockwood explained: "Gay gamers experience a double edged sword of prejudice. The mainstream gay culture and media are not supportive of videogames. Then you have the videogame culture that is not supportive of gay culture. So you have these people stuck in the middle who have this double edged prejudice. I'm hoping this survey would shed some light on how or why people go through such a process."

You can find the survey at www.gaymersurvey.org.

SONY PATENTS ORIGAMI-TYPE DESIGN

SONY HAS FILED PATENTS for a new and interesting design concept reporters have taken to calling Origami. It's got nothing to do with the Microsoft-backed mobile PC, but instead involves technology that lets users collapse a device into their pocket and turn rigid with the press of a button or tap of a stylus. The creation comes from Sony's Tokyo labs, reported NewScientist. com's Barry Fox, where researchers designed a flexible polymer that represent the body and screen. In the polymer conductive rubber bracing, struts sit idle until a current is introduced to them. This causes the struts to harden, solidifying the device into a specific shape, thanks to special silicone gel inside the struts reacting to the current. Apparently this requires very little power and Sony's design appears to harden in milliseconds. One suggested application in the patent is changing something like a game controller to react to a game.

NEXT-GEN CONSOLE SIZES

GAMERS ARE OBSESSED WITH dimensions: height, depth, width and mass. Cubic volume and density are not uncommon terms amongst the more enthusiastic gamers. Here, along with the image showing the relative sizes of each of the various consoles is a cubic volume chart calculated from the listed dimensions in the image.

PlayStation 3	8,726.9cm^3
Xbox	7,727.4cm^3
Xbox 360	6,616.9cm^3
PlayStation 2	4,179.1cm^3
GameCube	2,656.5cm^3
PS2	978.9cm^3
Wii	955.5cm^3

ALAN KOTOK DIES AT 64

NOT MANY OF TODAY'S gamers have heard of Alan Kotok, the first game designer. He died at his family's home on 26 May in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but will be remembered as the man who designed the world's first game. Kotok, a childhood prodigy, joined M.I.T. at the age of 16. He soon signed up at the M.I.T. Model Railroad Club, an incubator for the first computer programmers. The group originated the term 'hacker'. According to a dictionary compiled by Model Railroad members, a 'Hack' is a project with no constructive end.

But apart from exploring the first computers, Kotok is also credited for designing *Space Wars*, considered to be the first computer game. According to a *New York Times* obituary, the simple top-down shooter was programmed by the group's leader, Steve Russel, but this only happened when Kotok designed and gave him the math subroutines for the game on paper tape. As such, Kotok isn't credited with the actual creation of *Space Wars*, but it was his design. Mr Russel, in response to Kotok's death, said that he was an inspiration to the group and contributed to the game's design.

Two students playing Space Wars, the first video game

CAPTION OF THE MONTH

EVERY MONTH WE'LL CHOOSE a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject [July Caption].

HD-DVD WRITABLE MEDIA SURFACE

HITACHI AND MITSUBISHI HAVE announced HD-DVD writable media for the new format, slated for release in Japan by early July. Inexplicably, just like Blu-Ray, the rival format repeated the same behaviour: recordable media is heading towards the market, but there's no sign of consumer level burners. The format beat Blu-Ray to the consumer end for players, an important achievement in a format war that will be decided at the consumer side of things. But the specifications on the first batch of writable media from these two companies leave a lot to be desired. The discs will retail for around $17.75 for 15GB, not really economical when Blu-Ray offers 25GB at around $20. The HD-DVD write speed also seems to sit at 1x speed at the moment, half that of what Blu-Ray offers.

Announcements for writers are probably not far off, but despite the amount of fervour that surrounds the format wars, possibly because they are being created more by hype than actual consumer demand, things have been slow to get moving. Players have been slow to appear and the movie catalogues are very thin at the moment. The biggest challenge still lies in convincing movie fans that they should upgrade their existing DVD libraries.

Researchers at M.I.T. have created prototype batteries that charge in seconds. Using capacitors instead of the traditional electrolyte solutions, these new batteries also last longer per charge and don't degrade as much as traditional models.

Sudoku might be online, in books at newsagents and even in some newspapers, but if you need a fix that comes straight from your TV, this controller plugs into any television set and lets you play the game from the comfort of your couch. It would make more sense, though, to get a DVD version that works with your remote.

CBS has signed a deal with Apple, bringing the 2005-2006 episodes of **Lost**, all three **CSI** shows and **NCIS** to iTunes at $1.99 an episode. All videos are formatted to fit the iPod's aspect ratio.

Microsoft Beta testers flocked to the company's development site recently to get their hands on **Windows Vista Beta 2**. Apparently the feedback around the product isn't great, but it is still in Beta.

NVIDIA has updated its **PureVideo** technology to support proper HD feeds. The PureVideo HD technology will help machines stream up to 1,080p HD resolutions, though to get that performance you'll still need at least a dual core setup.

HD: 1080P MIGHT NOT BE 1080P

RECENTLY HITACHI ANNOUNCED A new chip for its HDTVs that will improve the output of 1,080p resolutions. Specifically, the company stated that the processor is capable of "Advanced 1,080p histogram processing", which theoretically means getting a much better looking picture on new HD models. But Bill Whalen, senior product manager at Hitachi, spoke to Tgdaily.com and set the record straight on 1,080p. Even though the processors exist to push this resolution, the televisions themselves are not capable of doing the job. In fact, sets that claim to support 1,080p can do so, but often force the final image down to 768p (1,366 x 768 progressive) or less.

The trick to choosing your HD television, according to Whalen, is to use your eyes. The specifications on a television often don't tell the whole story and even though a 1,080p image will be superior to that of lower settings, the price difference often doesn't reflect this change accurately. He offered additional advice when making a choice on your HDTV.

"If you watch TV from a distance that is less than three times the screen height of your TV, then 1,080p is worth the wait. If the distance is greater than three times the screen height, then today's [720p/768p] HDTVs, such as 42-inch units, offer an incredible value."

MAD KATZ SEES PROFITS SLIDE

TOP PERIPHERAL MANUFACTURER MAD Katz has seen its profits slide in its 2006 fiscal year. Net sales posted at the end of March were $17.2 million, a 21 percent drop from the same period a year ago. Its gross profit dropped by $400,000 from $5.2 million – 2.2 percent down from 24 percent. For the full fiscal year, though, the company made only around $12 million less, down to $100.8 million.

"Fiscal 2006 was a difficult year for Mad Catz and the interactive gaming industry as the console transition significantly reduced consumer spending on videogame hardware, software and accessories," said Darren Richardson, Mad Catz's president and CEO. "Consistent with industry trends, during the fourth quarter Mad Catz experienced a decline in overall product sales for current generation platforms, though we generated impressive sales levels and contributions to the total net sales mix from our Xbox 360 offerings." As the new consoles still penetrate the market, gamers have put off buying new hardware for their existing machines. Game sales for the current generation has also

slowed considerably, putting in question the real appeal behind backward-compatibility. But Mad Katz, just like the major game publishers, expect a turnaround once the new hardware settles into the market.

"With a focus by console manufacturers on the potential of the controller to play an important role in the interactivity of the next-generation of gaming platforms and our long-term position as a leading third party supplier of control pads, wheels and other accessories, we are looking forward to the latter half of fiscal 2007 and the launch of new consoles from Sony and Nintendo."

Solid proof that the Japanese have all the nice gadgets

Look & Listen
DVD • CD • GAMES — MP3 • ACCESSORIES

CHARTS

PC GAMES

#	Title
1	Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff
2	Sims 2: Open For Business
3	Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter
4	Sims 2
5	Tomb Raider: Legend
6	Guild Wars: Factions
7	CSI: 3 Dimensions Of Murder
8	Ice Age 2: The Meltdown
9	Splinter Cell Trilogy Pack
10	Guild Wars
11	Rugby 2006
12	The Godfather
13	FIFA World Cup Germany 2006
14	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
15	Sims 2: University

PLAYSTATION 2

#	Title
1	Rubgy 2006
2	Need for Speed: Most Wanted Black Edition
3	Burnout 3: Takedown Platinum
4	Tomb Raider: Legend
5	FIFA World Cup Germany 2006
6	Need for Speed: Underground Platinum
7	Ice Age 2: The Meltdown
8	Tekken 5 Platinum
9	Metal Gear Solid 3
10	Black
11	Toca Race Driver 3
12	Area 51
13	LA Rush
14	FIFA Street 2
15	God Of War Platinum

PSP

#	Title
1	Need for Speed: Most Wanted
2	Desparately Sexy Housewives
3	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
4	Daxter
5	Pink Paradise Table Dance & Strip Tease
6	Sims 2
7	Lemmings
8	SOCOM Fireteam Bravo
9	Splinter Cell Essentials
10	Bond: From Russia With Love
11	FIFA Street 2
12	FIFA 2006
13	Midway Arcade Treasures
14	WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2006
15	Kylie Minogue Showgirl Greatest Hits Tour

Nokia has launched an online game distribution service for the **N-Gage**. The games, which cost between $20 and $40, just need to be copied to a memory card and popped into the game phone. Get more info at www.n-gage.com.

SDHC is a new SD card standard from Panasonic that will cost over $200 for 4GB. It's also incompatible with current SD card standards and readers.

A team called the Devil360s plans to release a mod chip for the 360 soon. While unsubstantiated, the group claims that the chip works and that they are currently working on making the 360 programmable though a PC and allow users to upgrade the hard drive.

Microsoft has revealed a new keyboard that won't have a Windows key. The silver **Wireless Laser Desktop for Mac** boasts Microsoft's ergonomic keyboard and mouse design (cordless laser), along with buttons and shortcut keys catering for Mac users. The keyboard and mouse combo will retailer for $100 in the US.

Western Digital has debuted a Pro Edition to its **My Book** storage series. It comes in two models, 250GB and 500GB. It supports both Firewire and USB 2, and ships with EMC's Retrospect Express backup software. Rival Seagate also unveiled more personal storage solutions. Its Pushbutton Backup Hard Drive comes in a 750gb capacity, but is no bigger than a tape dispenser and supports both USB 2 and Firewire.

JULY

4

RELEASE: Juiced: Eliminator (PSP)

RELEASE: Super Monkey Ball Adventure (PSP, PS2)

RELEASE: Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers (PC) ◀

RELEASE: Cars (PC)

RELEASE: Cars Activity Pack (PC)

RELEASE: Titan Quest (PC) ▶

5

12

RELEASE: Asterix and Obelix XXL 2: Mission Las Vegum (PS2)

RELEASE: Jaws Unleashed (PC)

19

RELEASE: Prey (PC) ▼

24

NAG FUN FACT:
When a NAG staff member celebrates his or her birthday, he or she gets a free donkey.

31

7

RELEASE: Astonisha Story (PSP)

RELEASE: Untold Legends 2 (PSP)

RELEASE: Call of Duty 2 (Game of the Year Edition) (PC)

RELEASE: Baldur's Gate Compilation (PC)

RELEASE: Field Commander (PSP) ◀

8/9

EVENT: Mayhem OPEN LAN, Boksburg (www.mayhem.co.za)

13

RELEASE: America's Army: Rise of a Soldier (PS2) ▼

14

EVENT: Organised Chaos, Cape Town (www.oc.co.za)

EVENT: Games & Comic Fair (ICON) (www.rpg.co.za) ▶
July 14-16, Jabula Recreation Centre, Sandringham, Johannesburg
Join fans of cards games, role-playing, comics and other forms of
alternative gaming at South Africa's biggest and longest-running games
& comic fair, ICON.

27

RELEASE: Def Jam: Fight for New York (PSP)

29/30

NOTICE: Only two months until rAge!

3

INFO: Ten Best 1985 Games (as voted for on MobyGames.com):

1. Little Computer People ▶
2. Super Mario Bros.
3. The Oregon Trail
4. Elite
5. Time Bandit

6. Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony
7. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar ▲
8. Bomb Jack
9. Paradroid
10. Star Fleet I: The War Begins

5

MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS
FORTHWITH WITH MYTH, NINTENDO INNUENDO!

By Miktar Dracon

HI! HELLO! YOU'RE BACK! Got the pizza? Good! C'mon in, sit down, get comfortable. I love our little talks, I really do. How's the [insert applicable family member or significant other] doing? That's wonderful. Right, napkins are over there - don't get the couch dirty.

Today, I'll discuss a popular little myth that quite a few gamers seem to be propagating, unwittingly I believe - bless their naïve little souls. This is quite a popular myth, but is curiously localised to specific age groups – but more on that later. First, I need to tell you what the myth is, don't I? Yes I do, you silly person.

MYTH: Nintendo won't survive, because it only makes kiddie stuff.

And there it is, laid bare: one of the silliest myths I've come across (and I traverse quite a few daft myths, daily). Now don't just take my word that the above line represents a myth. Let's try and get you to reach that conclusion all by yourself, with a little prompting from me.

We know that Nintendo started life as a company selling playing cards – the type you play Go Fish with, or Rummy. You get the idea. Nintendo branched out over the years into toys, and it's worth noting that this was long before the era of videogames. The first games were only just appearing at various universities on expensive, room-sized equipment. After all, Nintendo started in 1889. It's been around long enough. It had even dabbled in Love Hotels and Taxi Services.

Early on, Nintendo started a philosophy that would forever shape its business into the success it is today – one of the only companies that actually made a profit from console sales (the GameCube). It's a philosophy that, when viewed through the eyes of an adult, seems entirely paradoxical: one that shouldn't make Nintendo successful, but it does. See, there's a trick here: it only appears wrong through the eyes of an adult, but when viewed from behind the eyes and mind of a child, it becomes painfully obvious.

Nintendo is for kids.

Now you may think, "Yeah, I know that. That's why they're 'unsuccessful', and why they need to mature to appeal to the older market."

Oh boy; is it ever clear just how our thoughts are shaped by our age. The question you should ask is: "Why should Nintendo provide for the older, teenage to mid-30s, market." To help you

KIDS AREN'T 'GROWING UP' FASTER; OLDER PEOPLE ARE JUST GETTING MORE CYNICAL.

along, imagine a food pyramid but take out the food. At the top, put old people and then gradient down towards the wider base, where toddlers sit. You see, at least in gaming, there are always more younger gamers than older. Birth rate vs. death rate – yadda, yadda!

So now you have Nintendo, always providing for that rather large four to sixteen market, which is eternally youthful. After all, we may think that the younger generation is getting smarter, more mature, quicker, faster and at younger ages, but that's mostly a misconception. The extremes are getting more extreme, yes, but most babies still have to work hard to say 'dada', let alone complex swearwords. Kids aren't 'growing up' faster; older people are just getting more cynical.

At the end of the day, kids of that age LOVE what Nintendo produces, and so Nintendo keeps producing for that market. As the kids grow up, they feel 'left out' from what Nintendo does, and subconsciously that may manifest as the innate urge to try and get Nintendo to 'catch up' with them, provide them with stuff for their current age.

But if Dr Seuss wasn't writing for kids and instead wrote for adults, who would write for the kids?

At heart, Nintendo will always be a toy company, and I hope that it never changes. I'm not selfish enough to try and deprive a younger generation, I can't connect with, of something I myself consider a valuable part of my childhood.

This was a lovely talk, please do come again soon. Want the last slice? Sure, have it. **NAG**

NO WAI!

THE DOMAIN OF THE_BASILISK

THE LONG HAUL

By Anton Lines

DURING LAST MONTH'S EPIC local ESWC preliminary it suddenly struck me how many new players had come out of the woodwork. And I'm not just talking casual weekenders here – I mean serious, ambitious competitors. However, each one of these aspiring e-sportsmen failed to achieve even a whiff of victory. The various tournaments were won instead by the established veterans, leaving some new players wondering why they'd bothered to put in any effort at all.

Every year I release my predictions for the ESWC event amidst a storm of controversy and raging tempers, but this year I was surprised to receive so many complaints from the new blood. The question, "ZOMG why was'nt I on yuor list???" filled my private messages on IRC more times than I care to remember, and for each of them my answer was the same. "It's your first time," I'd say. To which they'd reply, "But hwo can you no? Youv neva even seen me play!!" That, my dear newbie, is the point. If I've never seen you play, you don't have the experience necessary to succeed. I know it might seem harsh, but nowadays talent and practice are simply not enough.
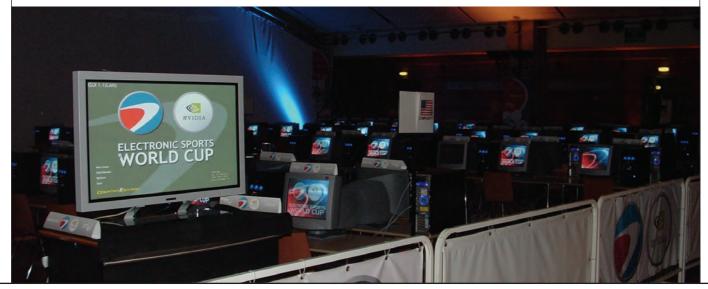
Take the ESWC *Counter-Strike* winners – those incorrigible lads from Damage Control. They've all been playing since 1999, when *Counter-Strike* initially appeared, and competing since the first national tournament in 2001. But did they win in 2001? Nope. Apocalypse, Explicit and Incin won their first competition in 2004. It took three years of unforgiving trial-and-error before they could finally say they'd topped the field. And since then they've defended their title, lost it, and regained it again; they've been to overseas tournaments; they've played games where

"BUT HWO CAN YOU NO? YOUV NEVA EVEN SEEN ME PLAY!!" THAT, MY DEAR NEWBIE, IS THE POINT.

R50,000 is won or lost by the difference of one frag. In the face of experience like that, your talent is meaningless.

Of course, the usual retort is, "But Ph4ntom won the first tournament he played in! So I can do it too!" Part of that is true: Ph4ntom did win Worfaire 2000 without any previous experience – but then, this is no longer the year two thousand, is it? Ph4ntom claimed victory when every player in the country was on a roughly equal footing, and practising eight hours a day gave him the edge he needed over the others. But today, if you want to compete, you're going to have to match not only his natural talent and rigorous training regime, but his six years' head start.

Don't despair just yet though: there is a glimmer of hope. When South Africa's current *WarCraft III* champion, Shase, won his first national tournament in 2005, he was also a complete unknown. What was different in his case, you might ask. Was he just that talented? The answer is a phenomenon I like to call the "generation gap." Shase's rise to fame coincided, fortunately for him, with the retirement of the previous *WarCraft III* champions, clan Nightfall. Because South Africa's gaming communities are so small and close-knit, skill levels tend to remain fairly constant. The top players practice exclusively against each other, and it's difficult for would-be challengers to get a foot in the door. However, every so often a group of veterans retires, and this makes way for the next wave of players. So essentially, if you're trying to become the next SA champ, I won't tell you it's impossible. I'll assure you that it's going to take a lot longer than you think, but if you hang in there as long as is needed, you're in with a shot. **NAG**

Antec P180 - a silent chassis with NO compromise ....

Antec.
The Power of You

DAMMIT

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

By Megan Hughes

THE WEEKEND BEFORE A Monday NAG deadline, my infant computer went in for repairs. The cause for its complaints are still unknown, but the person who's supposed to be fixing it, the person I have informed clearly in unbroken Swahili about the urgency of the repairs, was on sick leave. It's a month old computer, a guilt-gift from my parents who know that my old mildly psychotic flickering screen probably damaged my retinas irreparably, and yet it has been giving me problems from the word go. The first thing to give problems was the sound: somehow, even with the correct drivers for the sound card and all volume controls un-muted, the speakers failed to produce any sound (except for one incident where, unplugged, they seemed to be picking up 'white noise'. Perhaps I should have taken that as a warning…). Several hours of fiddling with sound card, downloading driver versions and profuse swearing produced no further results, and the poor thing was deemed mute.

Because I still needed it for 'work purposes' (i.e. for the purpose of avoiding all work until the last possible minute), I didn't arrange for a professional's touch just yet. Then, less than three weeks after it first arrived, the mouse started lagging during all-important gaming sessions and in the use of DOS applications. It was first suspected that the USB port the mouse was attached to may have been faulty and so the mouse cable was moved, rather violently, between the two available USB ports, but, alas, it was to no avail.

In the meantime, to add to all the aforementioned

I, AND MY SAD LITTLE PC, NEEDED SOME PROFESSIONAL HELP.

misfortunes and definite frustrations, the wireless network setup in the house stopped picking up a signal for no apparent reason whatsoever. No amount of setting adjustment, or Swahili lessons, seemed to help and the computer was then deemed a 'lonely-mute'. Still, I didn't take the computer in to see the professionals.

The ADSL line was also meant to have been installed during the computer's short stay in my house, but, and I lay blame solely at the feet of the Telkom officials, it obviously didn't happen.

All these failings of the computer accumulated in me finally breaking down and admitting that I, and my sad little PC, needed some professional help.

But why am I telling you all of this? Well, I think it's vital that I exactly explain the cause for this waffling column that has replaced my normal ranting column. Okay, that's not totally true: my columns usually rant a bit, but usually they have more of a purpose or, if you're lucky, a deeper hidden meaning.

Anyway, while my computer was generally failing at any form of correct functioning, pausing now and then to remind me in white text on a blue screen that something in my computer is "less than not equal to" (what it's referring to I'm not sure) and explaining that if this was the first time I'd seen the message (yeah, first time this morning) I could just restart my computer, I was happily punching away at my, still relatively clean, keyboard trying to produce something read worthy for NAG. All that hard work is right now sitting on my hard drive in an office backroom somewhere waiting for Christie (or whatever her name is) to come back from sick leave. Why didn't I back up all my work? My wireless connection wasn't working… and yes, I was too lazy to find a flash disk to back up to.

So, boys and girls, the moral of the story? Back up, back up, and back up! And when you don't, just waffle on about how you didn't.   **NAG**

Laws of Physics Make Games Look and Feel Like the Real Thing

ASUS Unveils World's First Add-In Card with PhysX Processing Unit

Game titles with crazier and crazier graphics are hitting the stores every year. Do you think your computer setup is powerful enough to really take advantage of the 3D animators' skills and efforts?

First PhysX card from ASUS delivers true video realism

Things don't just look real, they act real and feel real. Massively destructible buildings and landscapes, explosions that cause collateral damage, lifelike characters with spectacular new weapons, realistic smoke, fog and moving fluids are all now possible.......but only with the AGEIA™ PhysX™ processor

In a gaming system, the CPU (Central Processing Unit) drives game AI and logic, while the GPU (Graphics Processing Unit) delivers beautiful three-dimensional visual representation. This year, a third component has arrived that will blow your mind away with never-seen-before dynamic motion and interaction.

The PhysX P1 card is the world's first to incorporate a PPU (PhysX Processing Unit) to take gamers to a whole new level of video realism. Currently only two companies are scheduled to manufacture PPU cards, currently only two companies are scheduled to manufacture PPU cards, and ASUS is one of the pioneers.

By bringing the laws of physics into video performance, systems with the PhysX P1 card can now offer enhanced realism for explosions, flying debris, liquid flows, water splashes and movements influenced by wind. No two motions will be the same, which means no more canned animations and predetermined interaction.

The PhysX P1 is first to leverage the PhysX core that optimized specifically for dynamic large-scale, physics processing. This new video technology accelerates real-time physical motion and interaction at a scale far beyond those of CPUs and GPUs.

With the list of growing PhysX accelerated games poised to hit the stores this year, players need to equip themselves with the most advanced graphics technology to experience gaming realism that not only looks real but acts and feels real as well.

KINGPIN

RAGE ANGRY, RAGE SMASH

By Michael James

IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN. Time to blatantly abuse good solid unbiased magazine space and punt the greatest gaming and technology event in the country: rAge. It has no equal and it is the definitive benchmark for consumer electronic entertainment events.

So why does this magazine, SA Computer Magazine and Custom PC South Africa all push rAge down your throat every year? The reason is simply because we put the event together and then switch it on for a weekend of fun and games. The event is run, owned and organised by the exact same people who put these magazines together. So naturally we'll want everyone who reads any of our publications and is able to, to be there. Well this is how we see it. The other important thing rAge does is grow the gaming industry by talking to the enthusiast market (you) and the mainstream market (everyone else). The more mainstream people who take an interest in gaming, the more the whole industry will grow - which is good for NAG, because then we can expand, which will be good for you. Well, at least that's what we'll be telling you when that happens. But before you commit a few hours of your weekend later this year…

rAge 2006

I'm going to assume for a second that you don't know what rAge is and haven't been there before. After receiving the results of our recent survey, it seems that a surprisingly large chunk of our readership (even taking into account Cape Town and Durban) haven't ever been to rAge. So, what exactly are you people doing over the rAge weekend? Is it really going to kill you to stick your nose in and have a look around? We know the weekend is prime and holy gaming time and even we don't enjoy giving that up. But we've gone to great lengths to ensure that rAge runs during school holiday, so there's simply no excuse for you not popping in on Friday. This year we've made rAge into something that'll really be worthwhile. Perhaps we haven't been persuasive enough in our marketing hype to attract the very people who inspired us to do this whole thing in the first place.

So here's our latest attempt. You'll be pleasantly surprised this year as we're going to be making a few highly exclusive

IT'S THE PLACE TO GO TO SEE MANY NEW GAMES THAT WON'T BE RELEASED FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT SIX MONTHS, VERY SIMILAR IN FACT TO E3

'announcements' on the rAge Website in the months to come (www.rageexpo.co.za). One in particular is going to change the face of gaming in this country forever. This might sound very dramatic but (surprisingly) we do actually know what's going on in the industry, because we're the confidential ear most rumours are whispered into. It's just a pity we haven't a clue which are the real rumours and which are fabricated rumours – you've got to be especially careful around 1 April each year. It gets so bad that at least two staff members here refuse to actually read news on that day, but choose to rather play games and write reviews. But anyway, back to rAge.

It's the place to go to see many new games that won't be released for at least the next six months, very similar in fact to E3. The industry in South Africa is really coming around to the idea of rAge and many of the distributors are right now fighting tooth and claw to get some of the hotness that was shown at E3 in Los Angeles. I'm not even going to say anything about the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3, because just saying that is too much already – still all rumoured, keep in mind. There are just so many secret meetings and urgent phone calls any normal person can deal with without having any 'official' information. Let's just say: watch this space next month for some updates.

Next up on your good reasons to attend rAge is to buy stuff cheap. We've been telling all the retailers that there are a great number of readers that have been saving up for almost the whole year in anticipation of rAge. Sure not everything will be cheaper than everywhere else, but there are some sweet bargains to be had, plus this is the only time the whole year that you can find so much variation in one place. From original models of your favourite game characters to tiny *Quake* symbol shaped case screws to bins full of bargain titles. You might even pick up that original copy of *Diablo 2* you've always promised to buy. There'll be average food and expensive drinks and relatively clean toilets (we're very sticky on this topic with the venue and have insisted on an ammonia wash before the event). There'll be a fully populated 1,200 Man LAN (tickets go on sale at Computicket 1 August), the biggest in South Africa ever and the only place you'll actually find 1,200 gamers all connected at the same time on a single LAN. This is all thanks to D-Link by the way, so thank them for their commitment to gaming in South Africa. If you add up what they bring to the table at rAge, you're talking about the biggest sponsor of gaming in South Africa ever. But enough with the back scratching stuff, you have to see this LAN in action to believe it. We'll be hosting a number of competitive events at rAge (hopefully some in the LAN area) and some of them might even make it onto SuperSport. We're also setting up an extensive viewing area for some of the competitions. So if you've always wondered what it takes to compete and win, come and have a look see. That's it for now. We'll keep updating rAge as we go along… **NAG**

RAGE – GAUTENG'S PREMIER COMPUTER, GAMING AND TECHNOLOGY EXPO

DATES
Friday 29 September – Sunday 1 October 2006
VENUE
The Coca-Cola Dome Northgate

The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

Big, red, and able to knock down tall brick towers realistically with a single blow…

NAG reports live from the Computex show floor

BOUNDLESS GAMING
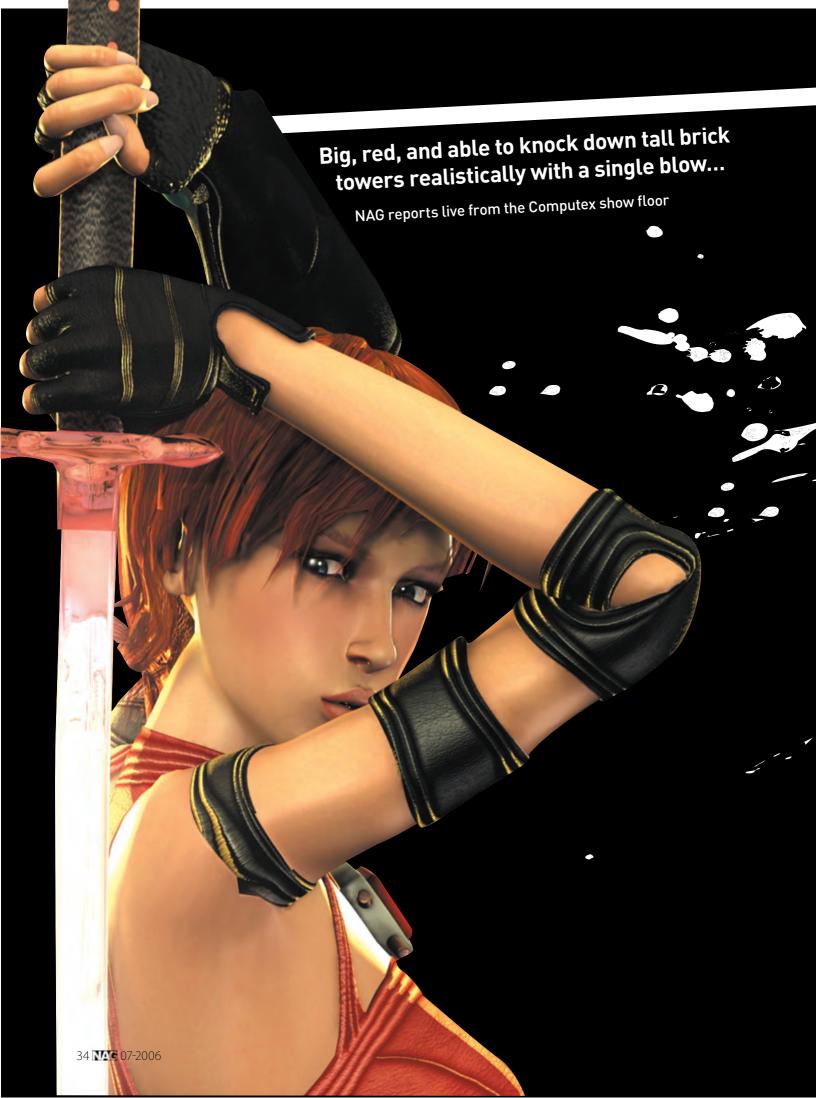
HOT AND STICKY OFF the show floor here in Taipei comes the 'Big News' in gaming. We've just come from the ATI stand, and the coy "We told you the X1K series was a GPPU (General Purpose Processing Unit) back when we launched the architecture" line has been shredded, balled up and slam-dunked. CrossFire physics has landed at Computex.

So we thought it would be a good idea if you got the skinny straight from us, your favourite gaming magazine, and we therefore rushed back to the hotel to try and get this news article squeaked into this issue of NAG.

WE TOLD YOU SO…

Naturally, you've probably seen this on the Net by now, but fortunately we have some extra tasty titbits to add to the already meaty meal. Oh, and one quick gloat. Remember the triple PEG-slot engineering sample 975 chipset board we looked at from Intel almost a year ago now and how we theorised that perhaps the third PEG slot could well be used for a dedicated physics processing unit (PPU) in the near future. Nail on the head baby!

Right, so we're looking at a 975-based Core Duo 2 system fitted with a 1,000W PSU and three identical X1900XT graphics cards. The two outer boards are tied to each other via the now-familiar CrossFire dongle, rendering the scene on the display before us, while the centre X1900 is calculating the complex Havok FX physics engine currently rendering realistic collision models on thousands of irregularly-shaped chess pieces. Thousands, that's right, tumbling down onto a small virtual table already choc-a-block with these objects, affecting each other on impact, and having a knock-on effect on the entire mass resulting on those towards the edge being pushed off onto the floor. And although the screenshots we later receive with FRAPS show only 11fps, the important thing is that it doesn't look slow at all, particularly when you consider what is happening electrically to generate this scene.

Just moments earlier the same system was running the classic 'Rocks falling down a mountain' demo, and with 10,000 objects (admittedly not very visually detailed rocks) we were still pulling around 120fps. Doubling that to 20,000 rocks saw this figure fall to 45fps.

You can mix the GPUs as well, using two X1900s for CrossFire for instance, and a single X1600 handling physics. In fact, upon leaving the hall we stumble across precisely such a system, with the aforementioned X1600 running off a riser-card converter from the 16x capability of the card into the humbler 4x PCI-E slot sandwiched between the pair of graphics monsters on this newly-released CrossFire 3200-based AM2 platform. In the future you're likely to even be able to do this with a single card…

WHAT X?

The large Canadian company isn't afraid to make bold performance claims either. Naturally, we can't in any way confirm these claims as the demo was largely hands-off. In fact, later we are firmly told not to reboot the unreleased and experimental new RD600-based motherboard to confirm its claim of "… unmatched overclocking performance" in the BIOS and told that this is most definitely a hands-off product showcase, with the company claiming twice the physics calculation capabilities of the dedicated Ageia board using the mid-range X1600 for physics duties, and a staggering nine times the potential of this solution from X1900. Comparisons between the two, however, might best be taken with a pinch of salt, as the first-generation proprietary PhysX engine can't really be compared to the streamlined and optimised Havok API in the ATI showcase.

ATI has coined the term "boundless gaming" to encapsulate essentially the same model that Ageia calls the "triangle of gaming performance". Highest-performing CPU coupled with highest-performing GPU in turn coupled with dedicated physics processing, in ATI market-speak.

Apparently the RAM on-board the graphics card being used is not really so much of an issue. Due to the incredibly fast pace at which data must flow and be changed in the highly parallel processing architecture necessary for large-scale physics calculations, not even 128MB of the integrated GDDR3 is used. Some might call that a waste, we prefer to think of it as being promising - built-in headroom for future developments…

THE HARD TRUTH

Sadly the theory of even older Havok games being supported by this physics model turns out to be merely that – a theory. Only games developed with the latest Havok FX API will be able to benefit from this technology, which in a way puts it toe to toe with the fledgling PhysX stuff as we're talking future developments here. That said, Havok is a well-respected and widely used environment and the number of games supporting it could well outstrip Ageia titles fairly quickly. It is nonetheless worth noting that, although it worked beautifully in the demo, CrossFire physics isn't exactly near to production, and isn't going to be with us before the end of the year at the earliest, giving the smaller company a bit of a much-needed head start.

You may have noticed that this particular demo included only solid, collide-able objects models. At another ATI demo station, the fluid simulation model is also running, and it too looks fabulous, while apparently ATI's tech boys are cooking up a deformable structure, like cloth or hair, as we relay this information to you. So the final completion date is still by no means final.

There are some other reasons, off the top of our heads, which we could think of weighing against the ATI solution. First, the cheaper cost argument (X1600 versus PhysX, not X1900 as this argument doesn't exist) evaporates when you consider the requirement of something along the lines of that 1,000W PSU, as well as needing a new, triple PEG slot board (logically a rather pricey prospect we're sure) if you want the full, asymmetrical 2 + 1 (GPU + PPU) configuration demonstrated here. Then there's the noise of three
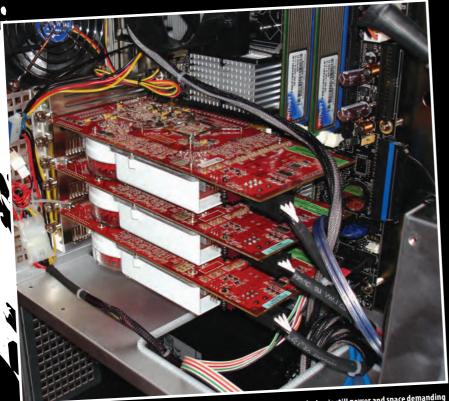
high-performance GPU HSFs working at once to think about (not that this is too much of a concern for hardcore gamers). Sure, you could run a 1 + 1 system on a regular CrossFire platform, but then you miss out on dual-GPU rendering performance. And the thermal impact of having three cooking GPUs in a closed system? Finally, there's the mundane concern of space. The system demonstrated couldn't have fitted a single additional add-in card with three dual-slot graphics coolers hogging the entire PCB.

HOW WILL THE COOKIE CRUMBLE, EXACTLY?

Although the model is spot-on and is positively jaw-dropping when actually running, some minor tweaks and adjustments to the actual methods might be called for in this case. Don't get us wrong, from what we saw CrossFire physics will have an enormously profound and positive impact on our market, and it's certainly a technically sound solution, but one can't help but wonder if being the first with a retail product, the first with support in real games titles available right now, and the first to even conceptualise the PPU might count for something in the coming fight.

Of course, with the influence and backing of both ATI and NVIDIA to combat, both absolute monoliths of the gaming world, even these potential advantages suddenly seem not nearly enough. Then again, despite the claims and explanations, PhysX has suddenly become the 'cheap' way of adding a PPU to an already full-on dual graphics gaming system.

Nonetheless, with ATI officially stepping up, NVIDIA having already announced its intentions, and finally a tiny start-up wildcard thrown into the mix, this brand new market is getting set to see fur flying just every which way. Either way, this announcement serves as a testament scribed in stone that the physics generation of gaming is about to begin. **NAG**

ABOVE: The current design is still power and space demanding
RIGHT: Real-time physics featuring thousands of objects

PREVIEWS

IT'S ALL OVER

HAVE YOU READ THE E3 2006 supplement yet, and made up your mind about the gaming industry? Do you think there are too many console games, not enough PC games, too many MMORPGs, not enough online games, or what? Whatever you've decided, you're probably wrong, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that you have heaps of games to look forward to in the coming months. If there is one thing made clear by this year's E3, it is that there should theoretically be a game out there for everyone – even people who don't like games. There seems to be a big push, once again, to try and get gaming into the 'non-gaming mainstream', as if we need to convert everyone and their dog into game-playing zombies. The reality is that gaming is young and as it grows it will become as natural as watching a movie or listening to music. It just takes time.

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT & MAGIC

DEVELOPER: Kuju   **PUBLISHER:** Ubisoft   **PLATFORM:** PC   **GENRE:** Action/RPG   **RELEASE DATE:** September 2006

THE DEVELOPER BEHIND DARK Messiah's multiplayer component (a separate team to the single-player project) has let the cat out of the bag on what we can expect. Since it's powered by Source, the usual game modes will be in place, plus a new Evolution mode. This resembles games like *Battlefield 2* in that it presents the player with various classes to choose from. It also seems that the character you choose will change according to how you play in general - in other words, similar to how the attributes of the single-player character changes depending on what you do. Multiplayer classes will be more restricted but share a similar dynamic. Will that be popular? It remains to be seen, but a good swords and sorcery action game for LANs has long been amiss.

DEAD & FURIOUS
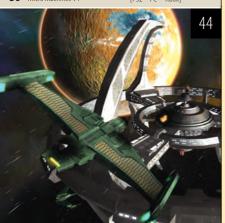
DEVELOPER: Dream On Studio
PUBLISHER: Virgin Play
PLATFORM: DS
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: December 2006

THE DS IS BECOMING quite popular for action-shooter titles, thanks to the versatility of the touch screen. It appears that the *Resident Evil* port to the platform kick-started a new genre for developers to mess with. *Dead & Furious* is a Spanish-developed title due out later this year and it involves a convict who has to fight his way through hordes of zombies and get to the bottom of it all. This means shooting the living dead with all kinds of weapons that you find. The game will also support wireless co-op for two players who feel like mowing down zombies, and the developers promise a wide range of environments to fight your way through.

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WHAT WE WANT...

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SIN EPISODES (EPISODE 2) (PC)
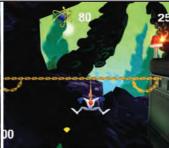
Enjoyably nostalgic to the point of inspiring old, long forgotten feelings of needing to get only headshots, *SiN Episodes: Emergence* left enough of an impression (and a cliff-hanger ending) to make us want the next $20 episode from Steam. There's something to be said for episodic content in that when you only get a part of the story you feel either more inclined to get the rest, or if you didn't like it to begin with, then you didn't waste any money getting the whole game.

C&C 3: TIBERIUM WARS (PC)

As venerable as the series is, is it a surprise to anyone that the news of another *Command & Conquer* was so well received? Little is known about the commanding or the conquering for this instalment, other than that it will look good and should, by all accounts, play great. The NAG office contains more than a few C&C junkies eager to sink their teeth into *Tiberium Wars*, as well as the upcoming macro-management-orgy known as *Supreme Commander*.

TOMB RAIDER

DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics
PUBLISHER: Eidos
PLATFORM: TBA
GENRE: Action/Adventure
RELEASE DATE: TBA

RUMOUR WATCH! APPARENTLY EIDOS plan to recreate the original two *Tomb Raider* games as part of the series' 10th anniversary next year. At the time of writing this was still a rumour, so there are no details. But the news is coming from multiple sources and can be taken as fact – unless you hear something different. Regardless, the idea of the original game being redone in the new style and engine is definitely exciting. The question is how much it will have to be changed, since *Tomb Raider* is nearly a decade old. So expect a remake in spirit and not down to the pebbles on the ground. *[Although that would be nice, ED]*

EARTHWORM JIM

DEVELOPER: Atari
PUBLISHER: Atari
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Adventure
RELEASE DATE: TBA

DAVE PERRY IS STILL trying to get the rights for *Earthworm Jim* from Atari, but in the meantime the publisher has secured said rights for online games and handheld platforms. Our favourite spineless-ground-eater-in-a-power-suit is back and takes on another crazy adventure. No details if it's a rehash of the original game, but Jim and everything around him is in 3D, though while maintaining the 2D look and style of the series. Unfortunately it's not Perry and Shiny working on it, but maybe he should consider working on an *MDK* sequel for the time being...

EARACHE XTREME METAL RACING

DEVELOPER: Data Design
PUBLISHER: Metro 3D
PLATFORM: PC, PS2, PSP
GENRE: Racing
RELEASE DATE: July 2006

DEICIDE; MORBID ANGEL; NAPALM Death; Hate Eternal. If any of these not only ring a bell, but have you shaking your head in agreement, then you'll be interested in this racing game. It appears to be a straightforward racer with weapons, but the big twist is the theme. Thanks to a partnership with Earache Records, the game has a full death metal soundtrack and even boasts some of the bands as playable teams. So basically you can take the devil children from *Deicide* and tear across various tracks that resemble hell on earth. That makes a change from all the usual stuff populating game soundtracks these days.

PAINKILLER: HELL WARS

DEVELOPER: Dreamcatcher
PUBLISHER: Dreamcatcher
PLATFORM: Xbox
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2006

XBOX FANS WILL HAVE to wait a bit longer before they can get their hands on *Painkiller*. The game has been delayed yet again, with Dreamcatcher citing extra development time to make sure the product is up to scratch. But it should be worth the wait, considering the intense fun the original game was, plus the screenshots look on par with the original. It might feel a bit dated considering *Painkiller* has been out for nearly two years, but somehow the idea of killing hundreds of monsters in one level will never get old. Though not mentioned, Live support is likely. Hopefully some co-op action will be the order of the day when *Hell Wars* is released.

GEARS OF WAR (360)

No cut-scenes, only a button press to view 'important events' happening around you? Well, that's certainly different – and we applaud different. *Gears of War* looks stunning and only gets better the more we learn about it. Visually, *Gears of War* is very much the poster child of the Unreal Engine 3, on both Xbox 360 and PC. How the game will actually play remains to be seen, although what was shown at E3 this year certainly got everyone's attention.

SUPREME COMMANDER (PC)

"More is better," is a philosophy most of the NAG staff agree with when it comes to unit counts in RTS games. The idea of an unlimited unit count may make our computers cringe, but it makes us warm with glee. The idea of massive continental-scale battles, spanning several landmasses, along with obscene amounts of explosions and 'pew-pew' lasers, only sweetens the deal to the point of dental nightmares.

HELLGATE: LONDON (PC)

Come on, we all know it – *Hellgate: London* is, for all intents and purposes, *Diablo 3*. You 'click' your way through monsters, gaining experience and finding new items. Yes, it is first-person but it is obvious Bill Roper (designer behind the *Diablo* series) considers this a fitting continuation of the genre *Diablo* very much made popular (to the point where we see no clones at all, as you can't improve upon perfection).

PREVIEW

INDIANA JONES

THE LAST TIME WE saw a digital Doctor Jones in action was in *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb* (developed by The Collective, 2003). It was a bit like *Tomb Raider* without the girl and it received mixed reviews from the gaming press. The PC version of *Emperor's Tomb* scored an average 75 in the June issue of NAG back in 2003 (the PS2 version scored 71 in November of the same year), so it's been a little while since we've seen an electronic version of Indy. The very first *Indiana Jones* game, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was developed for the Atari 2600 back in 1982, beginning a rocky ride for the franchise with hits and misses, most notable being *Fate of Atlantis* (1992) which is still widely regarded as the best game ever based on the license.

The current developer, The Collective, is the same company that worked on *Emperor's Tomb* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Their most current completed project is none other than *The Da Vinci Code* and they're also working on a game adaptation of *Dirty Harry*. So the credentials are there.

In terms of LucasArts there's plenty afoot. This game development division of the George Lucas Empire is now working closely with another Lucas company, Industrial Light & Magic [ILM] - the movie special effects outfit responsible for many of the incredible CG sequences seen in today's modern blockbusters. In fact, LucasArts has moved into the same building as ILM. Considering the power of 'next-generation' hardware, the continued use of computer generated effects in movies and the close relationship between movies and games, it looks like LucasArts is sitting on the very cutting-edge of game development. With the incredible resources of ILM at their fingertips, it's going to be hard to beat them in terms of sheer computing power and their already award winning techniques used in movies. Thus poised on the brink of greatness, LucasArts has chosen *Indiana Jones* to showcase the fruits of a powerful collaboration between cutting-edge technologies and innovative companies.

HE RUNS, HE JUMPS…
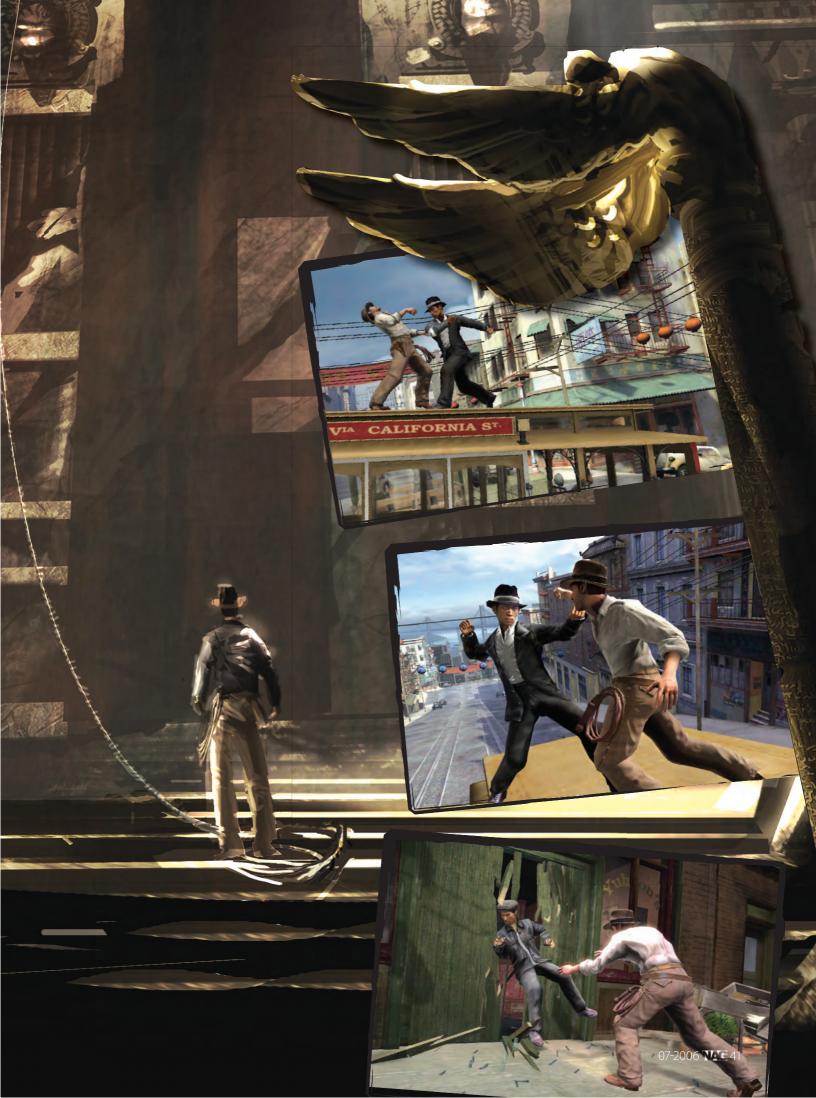
Two exciting new technologies are being developed and implemented in all new LucasArts titles, namely Euphoria and Digital Molecular Matter [DMM]. We'll cover the basic idea behind both of these exciting technologies, look at a few examples and then take a brief look at the game itself.

George Lucas always said that *Indiana Jones* is the perfect character for a game. He runs, he jumps, he climbs, he falls, and rest assured, there's always a rope bridge to be crossed and a handful of angry natives or Nazis somewhere to be whipped.

So, what exactly is Euphoria? We'll rely on this press release excerpt to summarise and then throw a few examples around for good measure: "All in-game characters act like real people with this revolution in behavioural simulation, ensuring a different experience every time you play." Although this technology isn't new (people have been using it for years - see www.naturalmotion.com for more), it's in the application of it where the real innovation lies.

Perhaps an example of the game in action is best to convey why Euphoria (a behavioural-simulation engine) will see game characters perform in a realistic fashion. Euphoria has little to do with the brain's pleasure centre and more to do with its survival instincts. The best way to cut through the marketing nonsense and acronyms that require a Google search is to think about self awareness and self preservation. Each character in a game, employing this technology, will understand the fundamentals of where it is in game space and what it needs to do, what represents a hazard (a fatal fall, for example) and what it needs to do to avoid the hazard. The technology demonstration we saw in the LucasArts booth at E3 showed us *Indiana Jones* standing on a rope bridge. By pushing and swaying the bridge, the game character tried to balance to counteract the forces being exerted on the bridge. Sway it left and Indy might lean and extend a hand to the right to firstly balance himself and secondly grasp the rope if required. Jiggle it around and Indy moves his feet further apart or repositions them to compensate - the idea being: to remain upright. The result of this isn't scripted animation sequences, but rather a game character reacting to user input based on a set of specific rules. The net effect is a completely different reaction based on what the player is doing each time, so the idea that no game session will ever be the same is realised. It's reactive and realistic all by itself, and just might be the next big thing in bringing the level of realism in games that much closer to what you'd expect to see in real life. The good news: it seems as though this technology isn't exclusively licensed to any single company. A press release states that LucasArts and one other publisher have early access to the technology, but might indicate that the inventors of Euphoria are playing the game smart and are making this technology available to license as middleware. If this pans out as predicted, expect all of your games in the future to feature this technology in different and exciting ways.

IT BENDS, IT BREAKS...

Next up is Digital Molecular Matter [DMM]. Unfortunately this is exclusively licensed technology (from Pixelux Entertainment) until the end of April 2007. We spoke to a representative at the company and they had this to say: "Other companies can license our technology beginning in May of 2007 for games shipping in October 2008. The exclusivity for LucasArts extends to their forthcoming 2007 games. LucasArts will have an exclusive on DMM technology through September 2008." They also indicated that they've received numerous requests to license DMM from several large publishers, good news for everyone involved - especially gamers. This is the company's official line on DMM: "Instead of using a surface description of a videogame object, DMM uses a volumetric representation. A surface mesh is extracted from the volumetric representation at the desired level of detail for display. True 3D procedural textures can be used to add detail for display and as part of the material strength evaluation process. Data structures are also extracted to make collision detection and contact evaluation very fast. Even special effects sounds are synthesized automatically from fracture, contact, and collisions of DMM objects." Visit them at www.pixeluxentertainment. com for a more technical explanation.

This technology is rather breathtaking and we were shown a technology demonstration described as "… like nothing you've seen before" – and they weren't wrong.

The technology demonstration was unique in that we were shown the Star Wars Natural History Museum, featuring blocks of material such as ice, glass and wood. There was even a model of Jar Jar Binks frozen in Carbonite (a cheer went up from the group). The presentation was introduced by a short video described as 'Star Wars Force Power pre-vis' and showed a sequence of short videos featuring various Jedi mauling the Empire's soldiers. The finale saw a single Stormtrooper patrolling what looked like a junk yard. After kicking at a pile of debris and hearing a noise, a Jedi suddenly dropped from above quickly picking the Stormtrooper up in the air using force powers and then slamming him into the ground repeatedly. Next the Stormtrooper was flung across the scene into a mechanical arm, then the entire mechanical arm was ripped free and along with the flaying Stormtrooper, was flung to the other side of the scene where everything came crashing down in a heap. Then, a TIE fighter swooped from above, lasers flashing. Quickly responding, the Jedi flung the whole messy pile of metal and Stormtrooper up and into the path of the approaching TIE fighter, destroying it entirely. This left the room breathless, with everyone thinking show that again! After this impressive display we entered the museum and watched as the presenter threw R2-D2 at various objects with some interesting results. DMM can basically be described as material in games that reacts realistically depending on its properties on a molecular level. Still not following?

Try this. Imagine a block of wood - not too thick, but just enough to make it sturdy. Take R2 and throw it at the wood. Throw hard enough and bits of the wood break off according to the strength and position of the impact. Reset the scene and this time throw R2 at a different section, but not too hard. The wood buckles a little and the outermost edge breaks off. No matter how often this process is repeated, you never see the same result. The breaking wood is not made up of smaller polygons scripted to break along predetermined lines, but is itself 'real' in the game world with real properties. Now make the wood stronger and getting it to break will require more power. Sounds interesting! But now imagine changing that exact same block of wood into ice and throwing R2 at it. The same 'game asset' now reacts differently, shattering into chunks instead of splintering. The broken pieces even glide across the metallic floor where the wood just lay there. This same process was applied a number of times and each example showed off a different type of material such as crystal, metal, jelly and so on. The amusing side of the presentation showed Jar Jar, now frozen in Carbonite, getting pounded – Carbonite is a fictitious material so the developer had to assign it fictitious properties. Throwing R2 at Carbonite yielded no damage at all, until the presenter changed the material properties to a softer metal. Now throwing R2 at the model caused it to bend and buckle out of shape. The sheer number of permutations will allow for any kind of material to be emulated within the game world, all of it reacting realistically based on its properties and what is being done to it.

Still in the museum, we visited a suspended Rancor skeleton on display. After tossing a few Stormtroopers around and watching them desperately cling to anything they managed to catch while in the air (wooden beams, bones and even each other in barrel of monkeys' style etc.), the presenter was again throwing R2 at the wooden beams supporting the skeleton, breaking them apart. Eventually a critical beam was destroyed, causing the rest of the supports and rigging to

Indiana Jones and the fate of Atlantis (1992)

Indiana Jones and the Emperors Tomb (2003)

collapse, and the whole thing came crashing down to the floor with bits of wood and bone scattered everywhere - a small example of what gamers can expect from future LucasArts titles.

Lastly, after breaking a giant glass window, we stepped outside onto the surface of Felucia, with its exotic fungal plant life. Again R2 was thrown at the plants, each reacting differently - short stemmed plants bounced back quickly while taller structures took longer. Next, to highlight a new level of detail smoothing technique, a wireframe model was switched on; demonstrating how the various plants changed from low-resolution models to high-resolution models on the fly, depending how close the player was to them. Automatic level of detail generation is also built into the DMM engine and it supports soft body materials too.

In simpler terms, in-game objects (tables, chairs, doors etc.) are assigned realistic material properties such as glass, wood, rubber, ice, metal and even fictitious material (Carbonite for this particular example). Because the objects are essentially volumetrically represented, they behave as you'd expect them to in reality. Wood will break apart and splinter and rubber will bend and return to its original shape. Add to that the ability to adjust other properties such as thickness, and your rubber wall will take a much harder knock before bending just because it's thicker. The more detail you add, the more realistic the results. Another good example might be a tall crystal structure. Knock away enough of the supporting structure, and the top might come crashing down and into the bottom, splintering and shattering other parts as it tumbles. Throughout, the actual in-game object never changes, only its properties. DMM is truly fascinating technology and like they said, there was nothing like it on the show floor at E3 2006. This is going to revolutionise the way we interact with games in the future. But enough with all the hardcore stuff, let's take a look at the game itself.

INDIAN JONES 2007 (WORKING TITLE)

In the actual presentation on Indiana Jones 2007 we saw Euphoria at work as Indy kept throwing a bad guy at a parked car - each time the result was different. Sometimes the blow was hard enough to knock him out or just daze him, other times he stumbled around but was back on his feet quickly, other times he'd stick a hand out to prevent falling

and then he'd actually fall and get back up again. Regardless of the process, each time there were small nuances to his actions that further enhanced the perception of random activity. Good or bad, most of the stuff on show was all about the technology. The parts of the final game we were shown went a little something like this.

The game is set in 1939, a year after the events in The Last Crusade and more importantly, the story is being overseen by George Lucas. The story appears to be the standard deal of artefact hunting and clue following around the world. The plot shouldn't come as any surprise – he is the world's most renowned archaeologist after all. Indy will use his fists, revolver and whip to scare the angry natives away. The whip action is especially interesting now that enemy characters are more 'real' and should react well to a lashing attack. And considering that the whip will be made using DMM technology, you've got quite a show to look forward to.

The first scene was from China Town with Indy surrounded by a few bad guys. One last piece of technology was on display here called an 'interactive Hot Set' (more ILM influence at work here). This is simply the way they're describing the way each level is destructible and can be used offensively. Indy beat up a few of the bad guys and then focused on the guy and the car described above. Next up we saw San Francisco's tram network form part of the action as Indy balanced on top of a speeding tram knocking the bad guys off as they swarmed around him in other vehicles. Again this was clearly chosen to show off the various technologies, as Indy knocked enemies to the street and often into other cars. Rather impressive and reminiscent of the movies. In terms of the game that was it: two very short examples of the engine technology at work. Although the initial development is only slated for next-generation consoles, LucasArts has announced that in 2007 work will start on PS2, PSP and DS versions. Nothing was mentioned about the PC, so time will tell on this one.

More of a technology overview than an actual preview of the next Indiana Jones game, the LucasArts booth represented a change in the way we'll look at games forever - they're upping their game on a number of levels and the results speak for themselves. Indiana Jones 2007 is still 14 months away, so there's still plenty to do. We'll be keeping a very close eye on any developments from this stable and when we know it, you'll know it. **NAG**

STAR TREK LEGACY

| **Platforms:** PC | Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Mad-Doc Software | **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks | **Distributor:** Ster Kinekor [011] 445-7900 | **Genre:** Tactical Space combat | **Release Date:** Q3 2006 |

THE MORE ASTUTE READER out there might be wondering why Bethesda are now doing Star Trek games when this always used to be the domain of Activision. [2003] The short story sees relations going skew between Viacom and Activision after Activision filed a complaint against Viacom for not supporting the Star Trek property properly. This was based on the steady decline of box office takings with the last movie, Nemesis, doing the worst. A tenth movie is planned, though, with MI3 director J.J. Abrams at the helm. How can Star Trek XI fail with this kind of talent behind it? Depending on hype and timing it looks like Bethesda have climbed onboard at just the right time.

So, after all that, Bethesda now has the exclusive license to develop games based on the Star Trek universe and are releasing two new Star Trek games. Tactical Assault, for handheld platforms and Legacy, for Xbox 360 and PC. For this particular preview we'll be taking a closer look at Legacy, which we was demonstrated to us in a behind closed doors hands-on presentation at E3 in LA.

IN SPACE NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU CLICK

Development duties have fallen to Empire Earth developer Mad-Doc Software, who has some experience with the brand in Star Trek: Armada II previously developed for Activision. Star Trek Legacy is a tactical space combat simulator and is due for release in 2006 which conveniently coincides with the 40th anniversary of Star Trek. Interestingly, various elements of Legacy have been in development since 2002 which predates the legal issue between Activision and Viacom.

The game focuses on ship on ship combat escalating to full scale battles with fleets of ships, many of them under your command. In the single-player game you'll also be able to upgrade your ships and use them in your fleet battles.

The action takes place across the entire Star Trek universe including Star Trek, Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, Voyager and Enterprise periods with a professionally penned story tying the whole lot together. The environment can also be used

and in the demonstration we were shown how an underpowered player ship was able to enter a nebula that not only hid the player from the attentions of the attacker but also had an interesting side-effect of disabling all shields, levelling out the playing field a little. Besides gaseous anomalies, players will engage in environments near planets, wormholes and stars. All of these bits and bobs feature in a dynamic three-dimensional battle arena.

During a typical battle the highly detailed ships will loose parts and have sections disabled so it's possible to keep pounding away at a propulsion system for example, thereby disabling it, making the resulting floundering vessel an easy target. This modular system is applied throughout each ship so weapons will actually destroy the specific section of the ship they're targeted on with realistic damage modelling and 'real' consequences. That is if they can get through the shields which also react realistically both visually and functionally and will deplete when fired upon. This depletion can then be adjusted for

by using the energy management system where players can decide how much power should be taken away from the engines to compensate for heavy shield pounding. This highlights that the game isn't just about moving ships through space and wearing a finger out on the trigger button, but also throws up an energy management system, a strategic battlefield management screen where you can order your fleet from point to point and various upgrade options where you can improve your ships capabilities, add to your fleet or even hire a new captain.

Although players are restricted to playing the Federation in the single-player game, the multiplayer component will allow players to duel it out as any one of the four available races [Federation, Klingon, Romulan and Borg], using any of the sixty available ships from across the entire Star Trek universe, in either small scale battles or massive encounters across different star systems. The imagination boggles at the very concept and this aspect alone will ensure many hours of online time as gamers around the world fight it out.

I'M A DOCTOR, JIM
In the presentation we followed a single battle and then moved onto a multiple ship confrontation with a space station under attack by Romulan Warbirds.

The game was presented on an Xbox 360 system and proved that controlling a starship was easy with rather straightforward console controls. In the first instance (single ship on ship combat) the game resembled an elaborate stage production with an almost graceful sensation to the action as player and enemy vessel carefully guided their ships looking for optimal firing solutions. At times the combat was frantic with almost random and pointless pot shots being taken by both sides, sometimes at nothing at all, but ultimately playing carefully with a sensible approach yielding the best results. There's plenty to keep an eye on during combat, even when you're going up against a single ship. Your position, their position, your energy management system and damage reports all coming at you simultaneously further highlighting Legacy as much more than an arcade spaceship shooter. After losing shields and a mad dash into a nearby nebula, the enemy ship was easily dispatched with a barrage of torpedoes and a few well placed phaser shots. The second part of the demonstration involved commanding a fleet of ships into battle to protect a space station from the unwanted attentions of a couple of Romulan Warbirds. This part of the game highlighted the importance of the tactical map where three ships were sent directly towards the conflict while the remaining two flanked the protagonists, and all of

this through a separate interface, which immediately threw up a number of options and showed the real tactical side of the game. However, simply grabbing a single ship and rushing headlong into the fray also works. The net result of five federation vessels battling against three Romulan Warbirds, a space station and planet in the background is something that really needs to be seen to be believed. Shields were lighting up while little bits of ships were being blown away as the artificial intelligence struggled to match the Federation vessels – it was a joy to watch and even better to play. The battle had only really begun when things took a turn for the worse: the Borg showed up . In an interesting change of pace both Romulan and Federation put aside their current hostilities and both sides turned to face the greater threat. This is a thin slice of how two typical game elements might be played in Legacy and the result is highly pleasing.

In summary, Star Trek Legacy is compelling and exciting if you like this type of game. Those looking for more simulation and exploration aren't going to get far but if you'd like to experience a story line that ties up all iterations of the Star Trek universe, blast your way to glory in a Borg cube and take on your mates in a fully fledged starship combat game, then Legacy is definitely the business. **NAG**

The biggest change in Legacy? The Prime Directive. If you have an armada of starfleet's finest, who needs diplomacy?

VITAL INFO

■ **Platforms**

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ **Developer**
Haemimont Games

■ **Publisher**
CDV

■ **Distributor**
WWE (011) 462-0150

■ **Genre**
City Management

■ **Release Date**
2006

HANDS ON TESTED

City building is slowly evolving out of its sprite-based tradition

All roads lead to Rome - providing that you build them

GLORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

CITY MANAGEMENT GAMES HAVE seen a steady, but slow, evolution over the years, with the leaders in the genre (according to many) Impressions Games being the most reluctant to truly innovate. After all, given the massive success of their game formula, why "fix it if it ain't broken"? But it is high time for the genre to enter the 3D era – the technology is certainly there, and no doubt fans of this type of game are not as resistant to such change as many might claim.

Enter Glory of the Roman Empire, by Haemimont Games. This upcoming title takes full advantage of modern 3D graphics technology, including antialiasing and texture filtering functions. By implementing such a graphical engine, the developers have made it possible for players to place buildings in more versatile ways than older games, wherein such placements were limited to conforming to a grid. Both placement and orientation benefit from this, resulting in far more realistic, organic, even town layouts. Of course, the raised graphical bar also has many aesthetic benefits, such as breathtaking landscapes comprised of detailed terrain, realistic-looking water, magnificent far-distance backdrops and spectacular light effects. A welcome detail is how the quality of the light changes over the course of a day, not merely brightening and dimming, but becoming warmer in tones in the mid-afternoon, for example. However, at this point the day-night cycle is the usual farce. Regardless of the time of day, the populace tirelessly goes on about its business (don't these people ever sleep?).
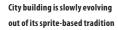
The overall mechanic is rather different from many such games too. Buildings' effective service ranges are not determined by calculating walking distances along roads, but rather by a circular radius that is shown when the building is being placed. This results in natural-looking settlements, with the essential services clustered in a central commercial and administrative hub, housing surrounding that and industries on the fringes. A sizeable town ends up growing as a number of neighbourhoods, each with its own basic services. These neighbourhoods eventually tend to grow toward each other and merge together, much as happens in real life.

The single-player campaign is, at least in the early preview version we saw, fairly linear. An attempt is made to provide choices of missions, but in every case this resulted in choosing the order they were to be played in, rather than choosing what to play and what to avoid. Missions themselves are goal-orientated – reach a population of X, qualify to build such-and-such and build it, ensure that percentage Y of the population is happy, and the like. The learning curve starts off very gentle, but increases in difficulty sharply after a few scenarios, teaching the player to explore all options and exercise initiative in seeking solutions or, ultimately, preventing problems in the first place. Such problems include outbreaks of disease, fires and other natural and unnatural disasters.

Resources and industries are handled in the traditional sense, except for the fact that the 'accounting' of quantities is generally less precise and is handled in a more intuitive fashion. However, this doesn't mean that actual figures are not available, should they be required. The food and resource chain is very reminiscent of *Knights and Merchants* (if you recognise this title, you've been playing games for quite a while!). A distinguishing feature is the fact that some professions are for men only, others for women, and some are indifferent to gender. Population information and management include these factors, and it's advisable to provide sufficient jobs for both genders.

This brief hands-on overview of this very promising upcoming title doesn't do justice to the depth and intricacies we are hoping to see realised in the finished product. Suffice to say, it is unlikely we will be disappointed in terms of game dynamic and challenge. All that remains to be seen is whether Glory of the Roman Empire will provide enough hours of town planning fun… **NAG**

HANDS ON TESTED

The surest way to survive in an abandoned town is to follow the spooky kid...

No, that is not your grandmother in the cellar

FORBIDDEN SIREN 2

THE ORIGINAL *FORBIDDEN SIREN* (*Siren* to most of the world) was a quirky survival horror/stealth-based game that, after its release in 2003, rarely got the attention it deserved. The first game (set 29 years before its sequel) detailed the story of several characters trapped in an old Japanese village over the course of three days.

Siren was co-conceived and directed by Keiichiro Toyama who had previously directed the original *Silent Hill* for PlayStation. Other members of the original Team Silent, Naoko Sato and Isao Takahashi, also had critical roles in the creation of *Siren*.

To call *Forbidden Siren* (and its sequel) "*Silent Hill* with more game" wouldn't be entirely incorrect. The way in which Forbidden Siren tells its story lends itself naturally more towards game-like machinations, in stark contrast to the art-project-gone-horror nature of *Silent Hill*.

Siren 2 begins on the isolated island of Yamijima where, for a variety of reasons, several characters are headed.

Much like its predecessor Siren 2 seems to be entirely character-centric, with the plot unfolding in small 'slices' of the lives of several characters over the course of several hours. These events don't happen in sequence - the main plot jumps from one character to the next. Again, completing missions and meeting certain criteria unlock more events for the player to play, thus revealing more of the story and how the characters are connected.

If one had to make a comparison, Forbidden Siren 2 very much tells its story in the same way popular TV drama series *Lost* does, by jumping back and forth in the plot, revealing key details that remain unrelated until the final climax.

The control scheme and resultant gameplay seems much improved over the first *Siren*. Turning and moving is now much more responsive, but also much more immersive. The first-person viewpoint is often used to great effect - climbing ladders or smashing open windows all have a realistic animation that really 'puts you there'. Viewpoints form a very important part of the *Siren* ethos. The entire idea of the game is how several people from different backgrounds can all experience the same event, yet tell a completely different story.

As a result, Siren 2 may once again be slightly too cerebral for the mainstream, relegated instead to the cult fringes of Survival Horror fans who like their horror with a heavy slice of exposition.

A bigger budget seems to have allowed Siren 2 much more in the way of art assets, character animation and overall polish, although it still looks almost as dated as the first *Siren* did. The quality is definitely higher, but it's not with the times in terms of what technology can do now (or even what the PlayStation 2 can potentially do). This may be a failing of either the team's ability, or resources spent elsewhere. Regardless, Siren 2 doesn't look as good as it could, even this far into its development. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	**PS2**	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer
Supersonic

■ Publisher
Codemasters

■ Distributor
Ster Kinekor [011] 445-7900

■ Genre
Racing

■ Release Date
30 June

HANDS **ON** TESTED

Unfortunately there isn't a mode to stick a cracker into a toy car

MICROMACHINES V4

ANY CHILD OF THE 80s, along with *He-Man*, *Thundercats* and others, should have no problems remembering MicroMachines. In the late 1980s, Galoob (now Hasbro) unveiled the "little metal miniatures" line of toys - tiny scale component style play sets.

By 1991, Codemasters had already established itself in the growing ZX Spectrum market, mostly with action games (the Dizzy series). Codemasters developed the official MicroMachines game, a wonderful mix of fresh new racing ideas and miniature-scale fun. Players rode and romped over pool tables, ponds and other interesting areas. The appeal of the game ranged from kids to adults.

V4, the 'true' sequel to V3, seems to have finally gotten back on track and taken the MicroMachines license back to its roots: fun. The previous titles in the series all went off on tangents, focusing on feature X or gameplay innovation Y, when the original concept was solid enough to stand the test of time.

Supersonic, established in 1989, was responsible for MicroMachines 2 and *Pong: The Next Level for PlayStation 2*. They were also responsible for the 'spiritual' MicroMachines, *Mashed: Fully Loaded*. Seeing them once again on the MicroMachines license seems right. It is subject matter they're familiar with and have an obvious love for.

V4 essentially takes the best parts of V2, combined with some fancy new trimmings and a host of content. The weapon power-ups are back while each of the 100+ vehicles has its own distinctive performance abilities. And yes, once again you can race right into a cat's nose (or bottom, though you can't enter, thankfully). *[The fact that you tried is disturbing enough, ED]*

Fans of the classic MicroMachines (regardless of platform) will be happy to notice the return of several classic tracks in and around the house, garden and beyond. The tricky bathtub rim track returns with vehemence.

The car-mounted giant hammer weapon makes a welcome return, completing what looks set to be the best MicroMachines package yet. The track editor, along with some interesting additions to how the track can be laid out, adds much longevity and entices creative fiddling until you create something that is barely recognisable as a track.

As with all the MicroMachines titles, the real worth is found in the multiplayer. The points system and the interesting game mechanics that come with it are still in place. You 'beat' opponents by having more points than them. If you leave an opponent behind, they will lose a point and everyone gets reset. If you get left behind, you lose a point. Driving ahead, the player cannot see what's coming up on the track, or where the next curve is. As a result, battles are more likely to happen on the straights with comical results at the first turn.

The early code shows promise. The game is far along and already everything looks slick and nostalgic. The colours are vibrant while the subtle addition of physics-based objects can turn a bland track into a sudden maze of twists and turns. If the final product keeps up the pace set by the early production, then *V4* may be the perfect MicroMachines fans have been waiting for. **NAG**

Enhance Memory Performance for Lifestyle Computing

ASUS M2N32-SLI Motherboard Incorporates Dual-Channel DDR2, AM2 processor and Unique Power Supply and Performance Adjustment Features to Bring Together Lifestyle and Personal Computing

Today let us take a look at the M2N32-SLI Deluxe, which is one of the first motherboards to support dual-channel DDR2 memory architecture and AMD's latest socket AM2. This board also offers some interesting and convenient features for efficient power supply and system performance adjustments.

Dual-channel DDR2 memory and Dual PCI Express x16
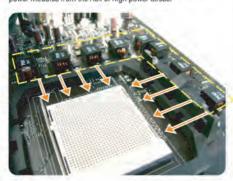
Based on AMD's AM2 Socket processor, the M2N32-SLI Deluxe supports the dual-channel DDR2 architecture to provide higher memory frequency and bandwidth for overall performance improvement over previous AMD CPU platforms.

This improvement in memory performance enables the board to better run resource-intensive applications such as 3D graphics. The M2N32-SLI Deluxe (NVIDIA nForce® 590 SLI™ MCP Northbridge), comes equipped with two PCI Express x16 slots, allowing two identical SLI-applicable graphics cards to run simultaneously Compared with dual-PCI Express x8, dual-PCI Express x16 delivers up to a 10% performance hike to boosts image quality along with rendering speed.

Unique AI Lifestyle Features
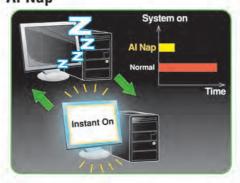
AI Lifestyle Series has been known for innovations that are tailored for everyday computing needs. As the series' newest member, the M2N32-SLI Deluxe also has a few new features up its sleeves.

8-Phase Power design delivers steadier power supply for the CPU by generating less heat than conventional power solutions and providing a cool computing environment for stable performance and higher overclocking margin. It reduces input ripple current and output ripple voltage, preventing the CPU and power modules from the risk of high power stress.

With **AI Nap**, users can instantly "relax" their PCs without terminating current tasks. System will continue to operate at minimum power and noise when users are temporarily away It downloads files and run applications at the quietest state while users are asleep. Simply click on the mouse to wake up the system in seconds.

AI Nap

▲ Instant suspend your PC without termination current tasks

To balance system performance and silent computing, **AI Gear** enables users to choose from profiles to adjust CPU frequency and vCore voltage, minimizing system noise and power consumption.

The M2N32-SLI Deluxe bundled the sophisticated **Array Microphone**. While recording, the microphone receives only the sound coming from the reception cone and ignores the sound coming from other directions, eliminating a large number of interferences including neighboring speakers and reverberations. It also features "Echo Cancellation Technology", which eliminates the annoying echo during audio and voice applications.

▲ The microphone receives only the sound coming from the reception cone and ignores the sound coming from other directions.

With enhanced memory performance and graphics capability to go with new AI lifestyle features, the M2N32-SLI Deluxe is ideal the foundation for building a system that will match your everyday computing needs.

Specification summary
AMD Socket AM2
NVIDIA nForce® 590 SLI™ MCP
Dual Channel DDR2-800/667/533
2 x PCI-E x16, support NVIDIA SLI at full x16, x16 speed
8 x SATA3.0 Gb/s including two external port / 1 x Ultra DMA
Dual Gigabit LAN
ADI AD1988B 8-CH (HD)/ DTS Connect

REVIEWS

WEB SCORES

LOCOROCO [PSP]

NAG [100]		92
Metacritic [100]		90
Gamerankings [100]		92

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS [PC]

NAG [100]		87
Metacritic [100]		83
Gamerankings [100]		83

SiN EPISODES: EMERGENCE [PC]

NAG [100]		70
Metacritic [100]		76
Gamerankings [100]		76

SONIC RIDERS [PS2]

NAG [100]		60
Metacritic [100]		55
Gamerankings [100]		58

ROGUE TROOPER [PC]

NAG [100]		90
Metacritic [100]		70
Gamerankings [100]		70

VIVISECTOR [PC]

NAG [100]		80
Metacritic [100]		NA
Gamerankings [100]		NA

EXIT [PSP]

NAG [100]		69
Metacritic [100]		77
Gamerankings [100]		78

BONE: THE GREAT COW RACE [PC]

NAG [100]		90
Metacritic [100]		79
Gamerankings [100]		79

The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh. All scores were correct at time of

64

74

86

80

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1 (PC)

Alyx and Dog return, digging Gordon out of the dirt and ensuring that rabid fans have more Half-Life adventures to go on. You can love or hate the idea of episodic content, but the general fact remains: people want more Half Life 2, and they're more than happy to get more Half-Life 2 in episodic slices for $20 a pop. Episode 1 features all the advancements made to the Source engine lately - the HDR maps are quite beautiful.
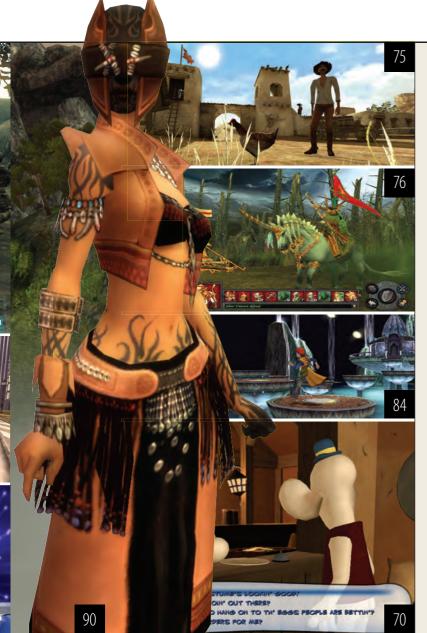
CONDEMNED (PC)
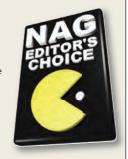
It's *F.E.A.R.*, but way creepier and much more visceral. If *F.E.A.R.* was all about the gunplay, then Condemned is all about the creepiness. The forensic tools (used to analyse a scene for clues and/or creepy things) make a nice touch, while the melee combat is immediate enough to make those creepy drug-addict enemies even creepier. The entire creepy atmosphere has us hooked, to the point where it creeps us out.

AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

This prestigious award gets bestowed upon games that really catch NAG's collective eye. The Editor's Choice award is for games that have some indefinable trait that just make them stand head and shoulders above the rest, peering about nervously. Usually, games that are fun, visually stunning and which leave a lasting impression are honoured with the coveted Editor's Choice. It's almost similar to knighthood, but not as humiliating!

CLASSIC AWARD

Any game that scores above 85% gets the much-envied Classic Award in honour of its achievement. Above 85% represents a game that has managed to set itself apart from the crowd of mediocrity – a game worthy of some attention. Games awarded the Classic Award are games you can trust.

SCORING

NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally it scores less than 50%. If a game brings something new to the table, or does what it does well, it'll go up from the 50% average. 60% is above average, a game that might appeal to some. 70% is a game that's pushing its own limits slightly, one that's perhaps putting a new spin on common ideas. 80% represents a game with a difference, one of quality and as few rough edges as possible. 90% is outstanding, a game that has separated itself from the horde to do its own thing, and does it well. No game will ever achieve 100%, because if a game ever did, we'd be out of jobs. Nobody would play anything else anyway.

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS (PC)

There seems to be an odd phenomenon to Rise of Nations: you are either playing it, or watching someone play it (well, that's the case at the NAG office where 'shoulder-gaming' isn't uncommon). The game seems to have our resident RTS expert enthralled, while the rest of us look on over his shoulder wondering why giant steam-engine robots are casting magic.

SUDOKU (PAPER)

Sudoku is an (almost) ancient Eastern puzzle that just happens to use numbers ranging from one to nine. Originally thought to involve math (and thus avoided by most of the NAG staff), now that the actual mechanics behind Sudoku are clear to us (thanks to Brain Age on the DS), most NAG staff are completing the occasional Sudoku puzzle in their spare time. Perhaps if the Editor would spend less time playing Sudoku we could all get a raise.

THE WARRIORS (PS2)

One has to appreciate the various vanity games that Rockstar produces, despite them usually not being great games. The Warriors, based on the old movie nobody really ever saw, is essentially a more linear GTA with gang members, Ferris wheels and two-player cooperative play. Most games with cooperative play get honourable mention here at NAG, since they're so far and few in-between, with the blame placed squarely on developers being lazy.

LocoRoco™

TRADITIONAL ARCHETYPES AREN'T AS sexy to the older gaming generation as they used to be, but there's still a large 'niche' they can satiate. The already culturally memetic game *Katamari Damacy* (PS2) has proven, time and time again, that direct violence and mature themes simply aren't a requirement for a successful game.

Every type of game has its own charm, be it manifested in violence, gore, cute characters or plot. Some charm stands the test of time and manages to re-charm the younger generations stumbling across the characters or ideas for the first time, while other games with their charm (or lack of) fail to inspire future generations.

A lot of gamers caught up in the hustle and bustle of the gaming entertainment medium forget that long before pixels appeared onscreen to entice

our attention spans, toys had kept the need to be entertained sated. It is when you forget that toys existed and held immeasurable fun that you may start to compare LocoRoco to other games with 'similar' mechanics, such as *Yoshi's Twist n Tilt* (GBA) or the obscure *Gish* (PC).

The much more elegant truth, however, is that LocoRoco is indeed a toy, manifested as a game with a charm that defies explanation. That isn't to say that adults won't enjoy LocoRoco - quite the opposite. The younger generations can appreciate it for what it does, while the older generation can find much enjoyment in what it is. The fact that it appears on a portable helps everyone involved get access to the fun that is LocoRoco. Much like *Katamari Damacy*, the simplistic nature and fun, vibrant visuals of LocoRoco mask a much more involved design, one that is both

refreshingly honest and uncomplicated.

The purpose of the game is to lead the LocoRoco, little squishy balls (or a larger single ball, depending) of adorable characters through what might be considered a 'maze' to the goal. Along the way, various elements complicate the process and then require slightly more cerebral activity.

The game is controlled via the 'L' and 'R' shoulder buttons on the PSP, with a single additional button, the 'O'. The shoulder buttons tilt the entire game world, which is two-dimensional in nature, viewed from the side, slightly. Tilting the game world has various effects, but the most immediately noticeable is the effect on the LocoRoco. They will roll 'down', bumping over obstacles and hitting walls. Holding down both shoulder buttons and releasing bumps the game world and makes the LocoRoco jump. Less

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NAG
EDITOR'S
CHOICE

BOTTOM LINE

LocoRoco might be accused of copying the success of Katamari Damacy, in all its quirkyness - the truth is rather, it shares the same ingredients for success.

92/100

BETTER THAN

Gish (PC)

AS GOOD AS

Kirby's Canvas Curse (DS)

immediate implications of tilting the world include water sloshing, vines swinging and other elements that are best left for self discovery. Bumping the world dually lets the LocoRoco jump over gaps or walls, as well as sending them skyward to 'attack' the bad guys. Rarely, however, does the game delve into direct-combat situations. Most of the game plays out navigating interesting environments and solving traditional platform puzzles that involve timing and forethought.

Often the level will reach a funnel-point where the LocoRoco as a larger singular entity can't pass through. Tapping the 'O' button quickly splits the LocoRoco into individuals. One gains more individuals by eating a certain fruit that appears in the levels, quite often in difficult-to-reach places. Once split up, the smaller LocoRoco happily start slipping, sliding and squashing through whatever machinations are beyond the choke point. Often these points serve as more of an entertainment moment than anything else. Watching the LocoRoco flow through the gears, spinning cogs and/or bouncing, flapping, flipping bric-a-brac brings back (or instils) serious nostalgic feelings for the sheer randomness of things-falling-through-things. Like the 'oil drops in water' toys, where the drops would sink and make various spinners spin, the LocoRoco unmanageably navigate the cleverly designed sections. Once over, holding the 'O' button causes them to shout out to each other, making them jump together and congeal into a single, larger, floppier unit.

Slowly but surely, progression through the game is marked by the steady addition of new
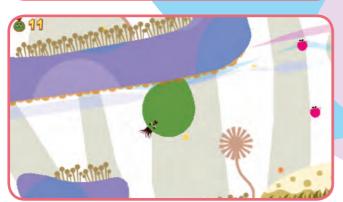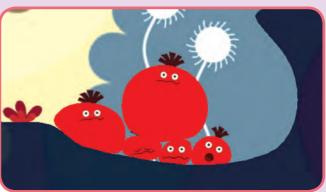
game mechanics. Vines appear which when jumped at, will cause the LocoRoco to latch on. To swing you must tilt the world left and right to gain momentum, letting go at the right moment. It's a distilled concept, but it works flawlessly and the only frustrations really arise from the player either misjudging distance, or timing. Further down the line, familiar elements are suddenly mirrored by dangerous elements that mimic the appearance of the original, safe idea. The fruit that bear more LocoRoco have a particular shape and style – later in the game there is a creature that tries to trick the player by mimicking the shape of the fruit. Once jumped at, the player instead gets stuck and, if not jiggled free, will get hurt by the creature bursting out of the ground. This variation and sudden breaking of

convention shakes the player up and will usually illicit an appropriate remark, usually along the lines of you bastards followed by a laugh. Another element, bordering on 'spoiler', is a certain creature that will suck the LocoRoco in, chew them up a bit and then proceed to spit out a new shaped LocoRoco. You are stuck in that shape, until the first pool of water that restores the LocoRoco to their elastic selves. This cunning element quickly changes the nature of how the player sees the world. Previously rolling hills now become an exercise in quick jumps to propel a square or rectangular LocoRoco forward.

Another quick and subtle mechanic is the need for a certain amount of LocoRoco in your group. Certain areas are impassable or impossible to reach without the right amount of LocoRoco to sing to
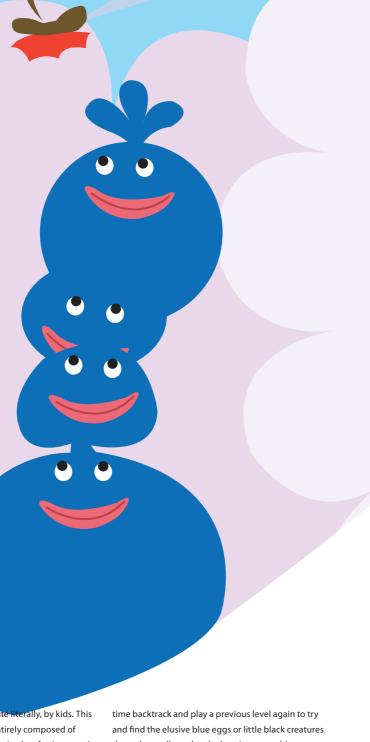
the moon-cat-large thing. It sounds absurd, but entirely in context with the off balance universe the LocoRoco live in. The LocoRoco amount mechanic is used in subtle ways further into the game, and merit exploration to uncover.

If there's one way to explain LocoRoco in a word, once you can get the idea across that simplistic visuals don't always mean made for children, it is by summarising the entire experience of the game into **Interesting**. One could also use inspired, or amusing, but LocoRoco is, above all else, interesting.

How the mechanics fit together, keeping the player interested in the short- and long-term was masterfully executed. A supporting idea to this is how the audio is put together.

LocoRoco has a type of underlying theme: a perky

song that is initially sung, quite literally, by kids. This (completely made-up and entirely composed of random gibberish, not to be mistaken for Japanese) song is then sung happily either by a single voice if your LocoRoco is a big single thing, or suddenly by a backup chorus of voices when the LocoRoco are split into separate entities. The LocoRoco themselves actually have mouth animations for the vocals in the song. Each level has its own unique song and theme, and the idea that the LocoRoco (or other characters) are actually the voices in the song that accompanies the visuals is an endearing one.

On the merits of being a game, LocoRoco manages to fill its package quite nicely. The game is several worlds, each world with several levels. Finish a level, and you can go to the next. You can at any time backtrack and play a previous level again to try and find the elusive blue eggs or little black creatures that, when collected, unlock various new things.

The blue eggs themselves contain parts, which can be used in an almost entirely separate game type. The parts, when placed in a pre-designed 'house' for the LocoRoco, will aid the single LocoRoco in the house in reaching more eggs or secrets. In this area of the game you can't directly control the LocoRoco via tilting, but instead you need to pay attention to how they move on, around or about the various parts you collect and place.

In the main levels of the game there are flies you can collect which act as a currency for use with the various mini-games that unlock. These mini-games often use the inherent physical nature of the

LocoRoco as a game mechanic. For example, one mini-game involves using a crane to pick up and grab the LocoRoco (much harder than you'd think, since the LocoRoco are almost water balloon-like in both appearance and how they regard the forces of gravity and collision). Another mini-game involves shooting a LocoRoco with a spring just the right distance, to hit another spring.

And then, along the way in the main story, new types of LocoRoco are introduced. These hold their own charm and subtle game-changing elements, but to elaborate on them here would truly spoil part of the wonder of playing LocoRoco. Suffice to say, each new LocoRoco 'tribe' has its own unique sound and interpretation of the main theme, as well as certain other re-occurring musical themes. One LocoRoco, pink and with feminine lips, turns the main theme from a children-chorus into a sultry French jazz snack - bizarre, yet artistically satisfying.

The difficulty in LocoRoco lies in just how much the player wants to do certain things. Often, parts of the level are tricky to navigate to the point of some

serious trial-and-error, but LocoRoco as a game never forces the player into these difficult sections. They are always optional. As a result, a basic play-through with no intent on getting pieces for the LocoRoco house, or to collect more flies, will present a fun, quirky but not too quick romp to end credits. Attempting to get more flies, pieces and more will put much more stress on the player and the ability to make timed, precise jumps.

It's rare that a game comes along and, while not doing anything entirely new, still manages to present the old (and perhaps once tired) concepts in such a way that it inspires immediate appreciation. LocoRoco isn't (perhaps unfortunately) a game for everyone, and can come off as quite corny to those who find themselves above pure enjoyment (or those who require much more complexity). As such, those that are drawn to the idea of the game should have nothing to fear. It is a full, content-rich game with plenty of mirth, challenge and quirky humour, wrapped up in lush simple visuals that say more than any amount of photorealism ever could. **NAG**

RISE OF NATIONS
RISE OF LEGENDS

RISE OF NATIONS, WHEN it was released, made quite a splash in the real-time strategy arena by borrowing certain key principles found in the *Age of Empires* series and modifying them to result in a game that appeals to a broader audience than the *Age* fans alone. The game ended up having a more streamlined technology tree and far faster pace, appealing to players who like a more intense experience. Now Big Huge Games has taken this basic framework and further adapted the premise. The game retains its fundamental mechanics and pace, but now offers a more varied experience that is not restricted to the theme of a quasi-historical recreation of planet Earth.

Welcome to the world of Aio, a land inhabited by several vastly different civilisations. The Vinci are a nation of technological innovation, led by prominent inventors. This faction is characterised by industrial machinery, firearms and environmental distress. The Alin live in the desert and wield magical powers born of sand, fire and glass. They harness the powers of mysterious creatures and beings, such as genies and elementals. The Cuotl are a population ruled by several powerful alien beings masquerading as gods (anyone else hearing echoes of *Stargate SG-1* here?). Their technology is highly advanced, based on high-energy physics, producing a variety of energy and beam weapons.

TELLING US A STORY

It didn't take long for us to make a welcome discovery. Contrary to the general trend within the real-time strategy genre, this game actually has a story! All-too-many attempts these days result in a dry 'plot' that is nothing more than a series of military objectives, without character development, and without emotion. *Rise of Legends* transcends that trend. Right from the start the player is exposed to a vile deed that inflames a passionate desire for revenge in the protagonist, and much of the story centres on this quest for retribution. Along the way, the hero meets other characters, who may or may not join his quest, or in which he may become emotionally invested. Sadly, however, Giacomo (the aforementioned protagonist) has been created as rather one-dimensional, consumed as he is with his sole goal, thus rendering him a bit shallow and unbelievable. This fact is also evidenced, slightly annoyingly, in the pre-combat 'briefings', which all-too-often resolve down to "… the enemy has been spotted… behind the dunes (or whatever other features characterise the relevant environment) – they must be destroyed!" Well, yes, but how about outlining an actual set of objectives?

Campaign missions start with a game-engine rendered cut-scene, though most of these are fairly generic and rather bland. However, this is a mere peccadillo, and detracts not at all from the overall impression, as the actual game action is the important factor here.

THE ECONOMIES OF WAR

The developers have striven to differentiate the available factions significantly, while maintaining basic consistency. This they have achieved remarkably well. At the core of any player's board is the capital, which usually starts as a mere site and nothing more. To advance various aspects, one must add districts to the city, and these cost resources. There are four basic district types (which are all named differently for the three races): military, economic, technological and palatial. A military district extends the population cap, i.e. the maximum number of units that can be supported. An economic district increases the resource cap, which dictates the maximum income rate of resources. A technological district provides research capabilities, in different ways for different factions. Lastly, a palace district can only be built when certain requirements are met in terms of existing districts. Other cities work in the same way, but the capital is critical in some play modes, as losing it will cost you the game.

The two races 'native' to Aio use Timonium, an indigenous mineral, and wealth as resources. The former is mined, while the latter is accumulated by trade caravans that visit other cities or various locations on the map. The Cuotl also mine Timonium, but instead of wealth they collect energy, which is accumulated by reactor districts (economic). The Vinci and Alin can buy neutral sites with wealth, while the Cuotl can do so with Timonium. The Cuotl don't trade, and don't use the concept of wealth. Such neutral sites can also be conquered. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages: buying requires the correct amount to be saved up, but also confers all attached units, while conquering turns those units hostile, thus requiring their demise, but can be achieved whenever your attacking force is up to the task. Generally speaking, a successful strategy will involve a combination of both these approaches.

A throwback to the original *Rise of Nations* is the idea of national borders. This concept was one of that game's most intriguing innovations, and its inclusion is welcome. Each

BOTTOM LINE

This game's developers have achieved something very clever here. By creating a fantasy-themed, technological sci-fi game, they have placed themselves in the unique position where they might be able to appeal to a variety of tastes, all within one game. Furthermore, the game itself is excellent.

87/100

BETTER THAN
Rise of Nations

AS GOOD AS
Dawn of War

city or utility site (which can include mining companies, mercenaries, unit production facilities or any of a variety of other installations) exerts outward 'pressure' on the national borders. Territory controlled by you is marked by an overlay in your colour, and (at the correct technological level) means that your units will heal while idle, while enemy units will take attrition damage. Attrition damage refers to the concept that armies in enemy territory have a tough time staying alive as the terrain is unfamiliar and local suppliers are uncooperative. Each side has ways to counteract the effects of attrition, which adds an element of strategy to any invasion plan.

An unusual aspect of this game is the fact that basic units play an important role throughout the game (though in the very late, very high-tech phase of a game they might eventually become underpowered to the point of irrelevance – but this only happens if the game has dragged on to the super-high tech stage). As is traditional with real-time strategy titles, a good mixture of unit types is recommended, as each has its strengths and weaknesses. At the top of the technology trees are units known as 'master units'. These are unique, which is to say that only one per player may be in play at any given time, and are immensely powerful.

In skirmish or multiplayer games, each player has three heroes at his or her disposal. These unique units bring special abilities to the party, and are essential for victory. The first hero is quite cheap to summon, but subsequent ones increase in cost. This is, in fact, true of any unit or building in the game – you pay extra for each existing instance of something you would like to acquire or create.

An innovative feature that adds a strategic element is the concept of 'dominances'. These consist of goals to be met in particular respects (units purchased, technologies researched, resources accumulated and damage inflicted to opponents by raiding) that grant the first to achieve them various rewards (ability to steal a basic unit squad,

ability to summon temporary allies, the ability to heal one's units and the ability to enforce a temporary cease-fire, respectively). Each time a goal is reached, a new one is set, granting other players the ability to claim this dominance. The dominance powers are on a timer, so achieving a dominance is not necessarily enough to put it to use immediately.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

From an audiovisual standpoint, this game certainly pleases. Detail levels can be very finely tuned, and the range of adjustments is quite staggering. Furthermore, each setting's effect on the performance of various subsystems is explained, allowing a player to customise these options specifically to any given system. Unit models are fairly detailed and can enjoy the benefits of rag doll physics simulation, should this be enabled. The terrain is a pleasure to behold, too. Buildings are interestingly rendered, with the Vinci's structures being vaguely unappealing to look at (though this seems to be intentional, given the nature of their society). The Cuotl's pyramidal structures are elegant in their

simplicity, while the Alin cities are positively breathtaking.

The sonic aspect inspired somewhat mixed feelings. Unit acknowledgements and in-game sound effects are perfectly adequate without adding anything unusual or revolutionary to the mix (with the exception of the Cuotl – their sounds are rather eerie and simply very pleasing in a high-tech, high-energy sort of way.) The musical score is quite varied – sometimes the music is orchestral in nature, and rather bland, while at other times the tempo picks up and its nature changes dramatically. On the plus side, the music tends to change according to certain criteria, when summoning a hero, or when a battle is joined, for example.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

For once, the hype surrounding the release of a game has not led to disappointment. Microsoft blew trumpets and flew pennants from the battlements, and with justification. This game boasts all the elements required for a successful real-time strategy title: tactical depth, appealing audiovisuals, an actual storyline and fast-paced, addictive action. Only time will tell, however, whether this one will achieve the status of 'timeless classic'. **NAG**

ONE OR MANY?

Rise of Legends separates the single-player and multiplayer experiences by granting each its own unique identity. This is most evident in the fact that the single-player campaign spans all three available factions, with characters being carried across right from the beginning, with new ones joining the fun along the way, while some fall away. Therefore, although several of the campaign heroes are linked in multiplayer or skirmish modes to specific factions, they play roles in the story mode even when playing different races. And this has been accomplished without causing contextual inconsistencies – the story fully supports these characters' participation.

Furthermore, characters gain levels differently in the campaign from how they do so in skirmish or multiplayer. In the former, such levels are acquired during the course of the campaign, and experience points earned during a mission can be applied to buy skills or skill upgrades. In the latter, on the other hand, experience is earned while the game is being played, and abilities either upgrade automatically or can be upgraded with resources, depending on the faction being played.

TRAVEL GUIDE

Each of the factions has its own unique nature and aesthetic style. The Vinci's cities look like crowded mechanised nightmares of cogs and retro-technological structures. Many of their units look like modernised versions of Da Vinci designs. The Alin have a distinctly Arabic flavour, and their cities reflect this style, consisting as they do of tall, elegant spires, all curves with no straight lines in sight. The Cuotl are very reminiscent of the Mayans or Aztecs, both in terms of their architecture, which closely resembles the temple pyramids of Central and South America, and their 'gods', which have very Aztec names and appearances.

GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER, or GRAW, is the first next-generation game from Red Storm's (mostly) brilliant Tom Clancy line of games. For the latest iteration of the *Ghost Recon* series the protagonist from *Ghost Recon 2*, Scott Mitchell, is sent to Mexico City to help sway the civil war in favour of the American economy.

After the complaints of ravenous Tom Clancy fans concerning the developers "dumbing down" their games and catering to a wider audience, Sweden's Grin was called in to do the PC version of GRAW, while Red Storm focused its attention on the development of the Xbox 360 version. As such, the first impression one gets upon booting up GRAW is that of the original Ghost Recon games. The presentation has the familiar minimalist look and feel fans have come to expect from Red Storm's titles and the use of current graphical techniques and technology means that the PC version is every bit as pretty and nicely presented as on the Xbox 360. HDR and Pixel Shader 3.0 effects are used in full swing, injecting the game with a vibrant, gritty war movie look, with Aegia's physics libraries making stuff react like it should (providing you have the latest patches, otherwise this causes a lot of performance problems). The game does a spectacular job of making you feel like you're really there. Grin has obviously taken a few cues from games like *F.E.A.R.*, in that your character has a very solid feel to its movement. The use of specialised manoeuvres like slides and dives really draw you into the game.

A special mention should be made of the use of audio. Spanish military commands and gunfire all fit into the environment perfectly, and the soundtrack helps create the tension of an urban sortie. The whistle of bullets and the rumble of vehicles all provide important audio clues, while simultaneously providing a convincing *Black Hawk Down*-like atmosphere. We mention the use of sound because the game purely wouldn't have worked without it. In a game about observation and tactics, a gamer has to use every advantage available to him or her, and Grin certainly paid particular attention to getting it perfect.

The game features a storyline ripe with typical Tom Clancy twists and turns, greatly enhanced by the excellent voice-acting and effective use of scripted situations. To be honest, we can count the number of people we know who've held particular praise for the storylines in Tom Clancy's games on a single hand, so it should be appreciated that, while the narrative is far more present than it was in the original *Ghost Recon*, it's fairly non-intrusive for the most part.

There are not-to-be-missed helicopter rides where you're doing nothing more than ogling the visuals and ignoring whatever member of the brass needs your services. But they're kept fairly scant, and they don't really become too imposing. We only mention this because the storyline seems to be fairly non-inherent to the gameplay, and the dialogue, thick with political terminology, probably isn't even the most hardcore military sim fan's cup of tea. That's not to say the storyline is bad, just that it still fits into the typical Tom Clancy niche.

Like the first game, GRAW is extremely slow-paced. The large open spaces and realistic modelling of weaponry mean that you'll spend a lot of time retrying from the last checkpoint. The difficulty curve could be overwhelming for newcomers to the genre, as the game provides only a brief tutorial condensed into a few pop-up messages. Just like in the original Ghost Recon, the biggest rewards come from slow, thoughtful play. The scope of the city also allows the player multiple solutions to almost every situation. This combined with the lack of a quick-save feature, and instead relying on a checkpoint system, mean that there's a large degree of freedom almost enforced upon the player. You're constantly challenged to think of the best ways to do things, and you're given the necessary tools to do the job.

In a game about war, the subject matter should be depicted accurately. GRAW possesses the typical level of logistical polish in a game bearing the Tom Clancy name. Available to you is a fairly hefty arsenal of various pistols, sub-machineguns, assault rifles, sniper rifles and belt-fed machineguns. Each of the weapons is limitedly customisable by picking and choosing from various modifications, in the way of laser pointers, grenade launchers and telescopic sights. The guns all feel robust and solid, with bullets behaving realistically, penetrating materials and flying in clusters towards you in a suitably hazardous feeling way. We often found ourselves ducking around our computer screens when sleep deprivation started taking hold. Also available to you is your cross-com, giving you command of your squad mates and providing you with an uplink to a

The future of warfare - at least the trees are left standing

NAG CLASSIC AWARD

BOTTOM LINE

A solid addition to the Ghost Recon and Tom Clancy families, Advanced Warfighter still has its flaws. But these don't stop what is a solid tactical game with new ideas for the genre. Visually and audibly it's at the top of the pile. Overall GRAW is well worth your time.

92/100

BETTER THAN
Operation Flashpoint

WORSE THAN
Ghost Recon

spy satellite over your mission area.

Unfortunately, the topic of squad mates draws attention to what is quite possibly GRAW's biggest pitfall: AI. While enemy AI is a mixed bag, sometimes being devious enough to do something that makes you clap your hands at being killed in such a clever way, and often falling like the enemy AI present in *Q*bert*, your own squad mates are fairly consistently thick. They'll take cover behind walls and face the wrong way, they'll ignore a Mexican rebel shooting them in the back from three feet away, they'll get stuck on a landscape, and they'll generally be a lot more trouble than they're worth. It's a shame, because on rare occasions they do exhibit the mentality of soldiers. The extra firepower can then turn the tide in a hopeless situation. The competent voice-acting of your squad and hostile atmosphere of the Mexican streets could have been an opportunity to engineer an emotional connection to the characters, but instead they just end up being a nuisance and a liability.

Luckily the multiplayer includes full cooperative support for the entire single-player campaign - good news for LAN gamers. GRAW's multiplayer also includes an adversarial mode, which plays and acts somewhat similar to *UT2004's Onslaught* sans vehicles. The almost reluctant-feeling integration with Ubisoft's online service, coupled with the ludicrous absence of in-game multiplayer options or even a spectator camera, sends a clear message that Grin is expecting GRAW to be played socially rather than professionally. The cooperative campaign is played by having a single team leader who has access to the cross-com satellite view, and may issue orders to the other players. This sort of dynamic of having at least one effectively helpless player stresses team cohesion and cooperation. We've already seen voices being raised over someone having been killed as a result of poor teamwork, so it's sure to be a hit amongst gamers who LAN with familiar circles of friends. The only complaint is that the amount of care and thought that must be put into playing the game guarantees it'll never be a game you'll ever get your *Quake*-playing friend to play.

Overall, GRAW is a great game, but it probably won't please everyone. The pacing could annoy shooter fans, and the truly stupid team-mate AI could drive away tactical shooter purists. As slick as the presentation is and as solid as the game mechanics are, it still belongs to a genre that is probably the best example of personal taste being the deciding factor. This is the kind of game demos were made for. The graphical level and freeform-like approach could be attractive enough features to offset initial frustration, or one could just inexplicably click with the gameplay. The reason for this could be the game's adamant PC styling. After recent complaints of shooters like *Deus Ex 2* and *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, the developers seem to have wanted to make sure their game is a PC game, with a PC game styling. Grin clearly knows that what PC gamers want are bigger maps, longer games and more numbers. **NAG**

Lush urban areas are great playgrounds for tommorow's soldier

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SiN EPISODES: EMERGENCE

AS A GAME, SiN Episodes: Emergence comes off as cheap, uninspired and lacklustre. As a guilty indulgence, it is still unsophisticated yet unequivocally enjoyable. This first of six (or nine, depending on who you believe) in a series of episodes may not be as imaginative and/or technologically advanced as other offerings, but it achieves what it sets out to do, and does it with flair.

With a (more global) price tag of R120 on Steam and $20 for a boxed copy in the US and Europe, it is hard not to find the package appealing. However, let it be made clear that Emergence is not worth the local R299 price-tag, no matter what reason someone tries to use to justify it. Yes, Emergence comes with a free copy of the original SiN (PC), but that's no reason to try and sell the game at full price. Ritual knew what it was doing with the price-tag and, like Valve with its own episodic offering, Half-Life 2: Episode 1 (PC), Ritual knew charging full price would be stupid. While not trying to incite an all-out price revolution, gamers who are considering purchasing Emergence should attempt to rather purchase it online, through Steam.

To call Emergence "Half-Life 2 with bigger breasts and swearing" may sound correct and humorous, but nothing could be further from the truth. Emergence has more in common with the original SiN than it does with its technological brother, Half-Life 2. Both Emergence and SiN are old-school in design and approach. Emergence lacks the fancy HDR that Half-Life 2 Episodes benefit from, either by choice from Ritual or just due to a lack of time/ability. Regardless, while both Half-Life 2 Episodes and SiN Episodes share the 'Episodes' in their names and in approach, they are very different beasts, albeit both are split across easily-consumable chunks.

Presenting a fun dichotomy, Emergence can be played with either hemispheres of your brain (or both, if you swing that way). It can be played with the creative, visual side of your thinking, or it can be played with your logical bits. Basically, you can run right through and reflex gun your way down corridors without so much as a second thought for tactics – and this will work. Due to the auto-adjusting difficulty and assist system, this can be an exercise in aim and movement, or sheer insurmountable odds if the game decides your aim is a little too good and you've chosen to not receive any help.

On the other hand, you can approach each combat arena as a tactical situation, aiming shots at specific explosive things and physics-related items to try and turn the tide of battle without resorting to inhumane aim. The levels

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
$20 / R299

Developer
Ritual

Publisher
Steam/Electronic Arts

Supplier
Steam/Electronic Arts

Genre
Action

Age Restriction
18

Specifications
CPU: Pentium 4 1.2GHz
Video: 64MB video card
RAM: 256MB RAM
HDD: 3GB HDD
CD/DVD: DVD drive
Online: Yes
Players: 1

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have that kind of design to them. The designers specifically put things around for the player to use, when sheer gunplay won't succeed. At the higher difficulty levels one will have to use the flying gas canisters to survive an onslaught.

A lot about Emergence is like that. At first something may seem basic, but if used correctly, it can be so much more. Health stations give health, and if empty can receive replacement canisters that let you get more health. However, you can also eject these canisters and throw them into battle. The end result of this: once shot, the canister releases a cloud of 'healing' that the player can use as either a staging area for an assault or as an offensive weapon against certain enemies.

So while the actual game mechanics are both shallow and deep, the plot itself is quite unabashedly fully shallow. The plot, its characters and entire premise could easily be transported back to the Wild West where villains curled their moustaches and innocents were tied to train tracks. In fact, almost the same thing does happen in Emergence, but that just makes it all the more endearing. Once you realise that the villains are supposed to be over the top and megalomaniacal, while the good-guys are supposed to be entirely

too magnanimous, then you can sit back and enjoy. Try to imagine a smiling man playing a piano while the serious business of villainy has a monologue session.

At the end of the day, SiN Episodes: Emergence is but the first of many and, to the credit of episodic content, is cheap enough to merit a 'look-see'. If you don't like how Emergence starts, continues or ends, you are in no way obliged to pay the rest of the money for the rest of the game. You can actually cut your losses in the same way demos and shareware used to let you do. You can make an informed choice about the rest of the game based on initial episodes.

The game isn't beautiful and at times looks dated and cheap. Sometimes, however, the game looks stunning and, given the right circumstances in a fire-fight, suddenly becomes quite detailed in a tacit way.

If you're still unsure, then no doubt Half-Life 2: Episode 1 will be seeing your money first and SiN: Episodes may catch you later when you're bored - or never. If the idea of an old-school, skill-required First Person Shooter with an emphasis on the person and shooter sounds just about right, then Emergence may be the start of a long(ish) relationship. **NAG**

To say SiN Episodes: Emergence is just Half-Life 2 with bigger breasts and swearing doesn't really do the game justice

BOTTOM LINE

A Pulp game, crass yet lovable despite the rough edges. It's fun to see villains being truly villainous again.

70/100

AS GOOD AS
SiN (PC)

WORSE THAN
Half-Life 2: Episode 1 (PC)

TAILOR-FIT EXPERIENCE

The big deal about SiN Episodes: Emergence is its dynamically adjusting difficulty system. Instead of being entirely autonomous however, the player selects what kind of experience they want based on two sliders. The first is the actual initial difficulty, ranging from Easy to Impossible. The second slider is the Assist slider, which goes from the left (Lots) to the right (None). Setting both sliders to the right will give you, by all accounts, something almost entirely impossible. You'd have to have pixel perfect aim and the timing of a jack rabbit. Setting the sliders to the left in parallel gives you easy enemies, with no armour and a game that, if it so much as notices you losing health, may just start throwing health-packs into your face (not really, but you could think of it that way). You can, with a little tweaking, find the perfect settings that give you a challenging, hard experience, but with just enough 'help' to make sure you don't out-right give up. For people who hate their games being on-rails experiences where the difficulty is scripted to specific sections, this system is a wonderful return to the days where difficulty-settings mattered.

07-2006 NAG 69

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
$12.99

Developer
Telltale Games

Publisher
Telltale Games

Supplier
www.telltalegames.com

Genre
Adventure

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium III 800MHz
Video: 32MB Graphics Card
RAM: 128MB
HDD: 140MB
CD/DVD: CD-ROM
Internet: Purchase
Players: 1

Cute and funny, complete with cow suits and large insects. - it's what adventure is all about

BOTTOM LINE

Telltale Games shows it's serious with a solid and fun adventure game that anyone can play on nearly anything for a steal. The Great Cow Race shows that episodic adventures aren't in any trouble.

90/100

Syberia 2

BETTER THAN

Day of the Tentacle

WORSE THAN

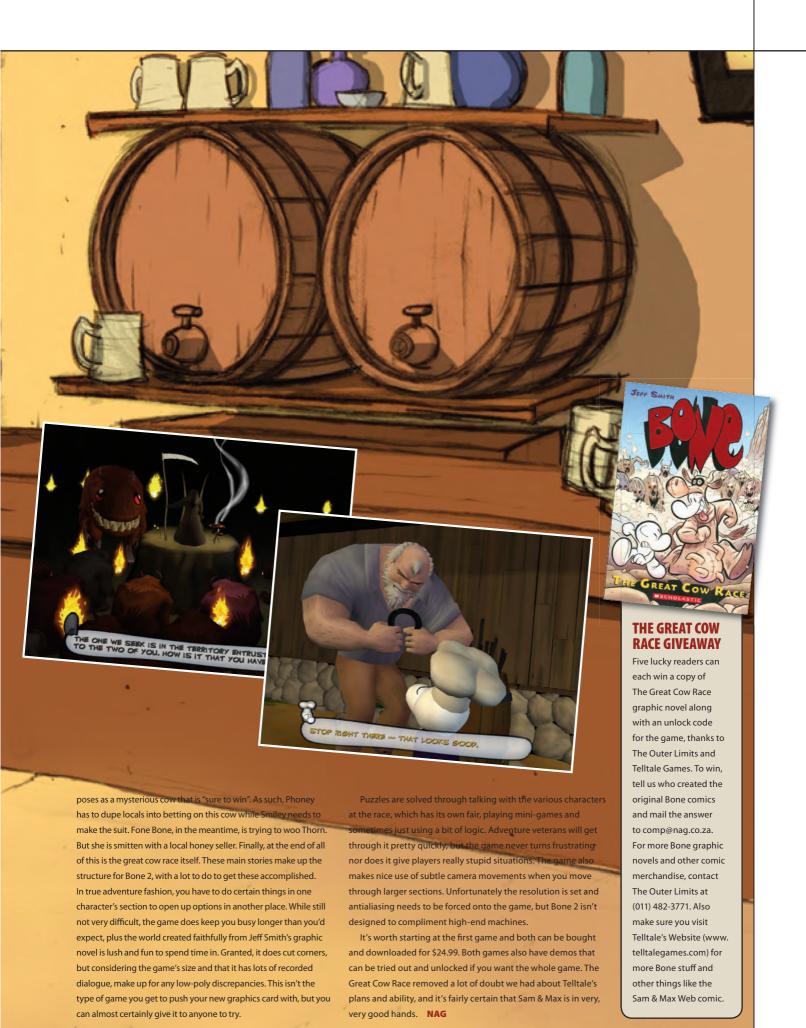# BONE: THE GREAT COW RACE

THE FIRST BONE GAME was a bit of a disappointment, but it had a lot of potential. Its greatest flaw was the simple Adventure mechanics and a very short play time. With this in mind (and with the added benefit of getting feedback with episodic games), Telltale Games set about to make sure we take them seriously. And we do. After playing The Great Cow Race, there's little doubt in our minds that Telltale and its episodic adventure games are on the right track.

The Adventure genre for all purposes died in the late nineties. But it has managed to sneak its head in at a few notable instances, such as the Broken Sword games. Still, it appears that the world is far removed from the hey-day of LucasArts, Sierra and Westwood battling it out for the best adventure title. While action and strategy games dominate the scene, the art of telling a story is slowly emerging again. The interactive thriller Fahrenheit brought back a lot of memories from the days when movie footage and game dynamics met. Similarly Bone beckons to the point-and-click days, but improves on this significantly.

There are four things to note about The Great Cow Race: the whole thing is just over 100MB; it runs on nearly any modern computer (including laptops); it's family-friendly; and it only costs $12.99. Since the title is episodic, Telltale plans to continue the adventure every few months with a new chapter. In the second game the puzzles and depth of adventuring has been extended a lot more. In Day of the Tentacle style, players can switch between Fone Bone and fellow Bones Phoney and Smiley. Picking up where the last game ended, Phoney meets Smiley in the local tavern and soon gets into debt for drinking beer. While working off this debt, he concocts a plan to win money on the local cow race. With granny as a favourite, Phoney arranges that Smiley makes a cow suit and

poses as a mysterious cow that is "sure to win". As such, Phoney has to dupe locals into betting on this cow while Smiley needs to make the suit. Fone Bone, in the meantime, is trying to woo Thorn. But she is smitten with a local honey seller. Finally, at the end of all of this is the great cow race itself. These main stories make up the structure for Bone 2, with a lot to do to get these accomplished. In true adventure fashion, you have to do certain things in one character's section to open up options in another place. While still not very difficult, the game does keep you busy longer than you'd expect, plus the world created faithfully from Jeff Smith's graphic novel is lush and fun to spend time in. Granted, it does cut corners, but considering the game's size and that it has lots of recorded dialogue, make up for any low-poly discrepancies. This isn't the type of game you get to push your new graphics card with, but you can almost certainly give it to anyone to try.

Puzzles are solved through talking with the various characters at the race, which has its own fair, playing mini-games and sometimes just using a bit of logic. Adventure veterans will get through it pretty quickly, but the game never turns frustrating nor does it give players really stupid situations. The game also makes nice use of subtle camera movements when you move through larger sections. Unfortunately the resolution is set and antialiasing needs to be forced onto the game, but Bone 2 isn't designed to compliment high-end machines.

It's worth starting at the first game and both can be bought and downloaded for $24.99. Both games also have demos that can be tried out and unlocked if you want the whole game. The Great Cow Race removed a lot of doubt we had about Telltale's plans and ability, and it's fairly certain that Sam & Max is in very, very good hands. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Killing cars, killing cars, killing cars...

BOTTOM LINE

Fun while it lasts, but quickly fades to mediocrity if you so much as lose interest briefly.

69/100

BETTER THAN

Lineage II (PC)

WORSE THAN

World of Warcraft (PC)

AUTO ASSAULT

AUTO ASSAULT IS AN appealing MMORPG, lovingly themed into a post apocalyptic *Mad Max* scenario with fast-paced vehicular combat, skills, and futuristic guns, all mixed in with cars, semis and motorcycles. If you had to make a really trite comparison, the game is like *World of Warcraft* with more cars and guns, but less orcs and colours.

As with any MMORPG there are a few things guaranteed. There will be those who absolutely love it with zealous abandon, despite anything the game may or may not do. There will be those who will remain forever undecided, except if a free trial happens to come their way. People on 56K modems will have a hard time playing it. Some people will cheat and ruin some people's fun. The critics will pick it apart until the gamers know they're playing a game and finally, the "X is better than Y" argument will fill up several forums.

Auto Assault has all those things, because all MMORPGs get them. The trick to judging any MMORPG is trying to find out what it does different, and how that appeals to you personally (or to someone you might know, if you're the type to recommend games).

After a large install and even larger patching session (don't expect this game to come off cheap when you get your bandwidth bill at the end of the month), Auto Assault is both a machine-hog and slightly underwhelming. Visually, at maximum detail the game looks good, but it doesn't look amazing.

Where Auto Assault sets itself apart is both its gift and curse: the vehicle side of the game. You are, generally, always inside your car – the car is the player. Except in towns where the player is a rather ugly-looking avatar by any stylistic standard.

Driving around the terrain, as a car-player, is very enjoyable. Fond memories of *Carmageddon* should give you a good idea of the feel – it's fun and reckless. Going from A to B contains, quite often, much more enjoyment than in actually achieving whatever it is you need to do at B. Call it 'emergent' gameplay. Just like in GTA you can get sidetracked into hours of fun not doing what you're supposed to. And in that, Auto Assault succeeds.

What sets Auto Assault apart again influences its positive traits and starts the problems. Unlike other MMORPGs, working together in a team or convoy isn't really encouraged or made accessible. There are no real benefits to driving in a convoy, other than having people to talk to and perhaps back you up. Certain skills from certain classes do have cumulative buff effects, but it's usually not worth the effort. The lack of encouraged teamwork, in the end, means that driving around the landscape feels a little too single-player for a fourteen dollar or so monthly subscription fee.

The irony is quite clear in that Auto Assault would have made a much better single-player game than a MMORPG. If you had to imagine playing *Diablo 2* with cars in full 3D, you'd have Auto Assault.

But, there is one more part of the MMORPG package that Auto Assault, like all MMORPGs, gets to benefit from: the content gets updated. Auto Assault, right now, holds a very high initial fun factor, but the overly complex crafting and lack of social elements mean it can't really keep the fun going for a meaningful experience. Content additions and upgrades, part of the subscription package, may or may not make *Auto Assault* the game most people, who are enticed by the idea, want it to be. **NAG**

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BOTTOM LINE

A solid action title that keeps its pace and gives action fans a lot of gunplay action while sticking faithfully to the 2000 AD series. Passable visuals and a short single-player campaign pale to the solid gameplay Rogue Trooper provides.

90/100

Killswitch
BETTER THAN

A Holiday on Nu-Earth
AS GOOD AS

Going shopping in Nu-Earth is always risky

ROGUE TROOPER

BASED ON THE 2000 AD comic series, *Rogue Trooper* might be obscure, but it's the fruition of Rebellion's efforts of bringing 2000 AD into games. *Dredd vs. Death* was a flawed gem, but *Rogue Trooper* does little wrong in terms of what it delivers. It's the desolated, war-torn planet of Nu-Earth and Rogue makes up one of the Genetic Infantry, special soldiers bred to fight and able to breathe in the poisoned atmosphere. A betrayal causes the slaughter of the GI regiment, leaving only Rogue alive. During the battle he salvages the biochips of his fallen brothers Gunnar, Helm and Bagman. Their personalities live on, each sitting on Rogue's gun, helmet and backpack respectively. Gunnar can act as an intelligent sentry and change configurations, while Helm's tricks include projecting a hologram of Rogue to distract the enemy. Bagman is a small factory, creating ammo, new weapons and health packs from salvaged items found on the battlefields.

Rogue sets out to find the traitor general and execute him. This takes him through Nort country as he passes the various parts of the conflict between the Norts and Southers. Since Rogue is extremely good at his job, he can kill enemy units with great efficiency. His real problem is when they come in numbers. As such, using things such as the sentry gun and Bagman's ability to drop micro-mines become part and parcel of the game dynamic. So does Rogue's ability to sneak up on a combatant and quickly snap his neck or slit his throat. Finally there are the context-icons that show what a shot might do: seeing a gas tank means your bullet will rupture one on a soldier's back, making for an amusing and often useful explosion. Combined, *Rogue Trooper* lets you approach the battlefield in a more tactical way. Usually the levels are fairly linear, but there is quite a bit of flexibility on how to take on the enemy. The soldiers react to events depending on how far away they are, and louder explosions will draw more attention. While the AI is pretty simple, it's not as easy as luring individual soldiers closer to their doom. Situations can be explosive, but taking the opportunity to decide on how to hit them is the most fun.

The game can be finished with run-and-gun tactics, but it's easier and more fun to take a stealthy approach first, decide on an attack plan and then cut through the soldiers before they know what hit them. Heavier units such as Mechs become commonplace after a while, but *Rogue Trooper's* approach is more about style and thought than determination. Since he can take cover easily and take easy aim with tricky shots, smart and paced attacks can tear a hole through even the largest groups of soldiers.

It might not look the part, but *Rogue Trooper* is solid and inventive. Unfortunately it doesn't last long, but the co-op feature makes up for this. Perhaps it's not as brilliant as we make it out to be, but the game definitely has charm, does its job well and gives you a lot of bang for your buck. **NAG**

Deadpan horizon and Dodgy architecture - ah, the Wild West

VITAL INFO

■ **Platforms**

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ **Suggested Retail Price**
R299

■ **Developer**
Spellbound

■ **Publisher**
Atari

■ **Supplier**
Megarom [011] 234-2680

■ **Genre**
Strategy

■ **Age Restriction**
12+

■ **Specifications**
CPU: Pentium 4 2.0GHz
Video: 128MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 4.0GB HDD
CD/DVD: DVD-ROM
Internet: Not required
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Losing its way somewhere, Desperados 2 takes on too much action that doesn't gel with the sluggish control system. Though it's visually impressive on high-end systems, the gameplay flaws make for a disappointing strategy experience.

65/100

DESPERADOS 2: COOPER'S REVENGE

DURING THE SAME TIME *Commandos* had its hey-day, a similar game appeared, but transposed the action from World War II to the Wild West. *Desperados: Wanted Dead or Alive* followed the *Commandos* formula closely, but it created enough colour and variation in its approach that made it more of a title using the same system than a pretender to the throne. They were essentially two games of the same genre and while *Desperados* didn't dare stray far off the beaten path, it had enough of its own quirks and ideas to make it stand apart for fans. The story was flamboyant and rich, while the art was deep and interesting. The various characters also created new options on what to do during a mission.

Still, a sequel took a long time to realise, long enough to jump with both feet into the 3D age. Desperados 2 takes players back to the Wild West where Cooper and his crew get involved with a mystery involving his brother. As usual, this will take you across the badlands from dusty towns to Spanish forts and bandit caves. Providing you have the hardware for it, the visuals are really impressive and as rich as in the original, including Havok-powered physics.

Unfortunately the interface is slow anyway, which is at odds with the game's habit of pushing you into quick-draw situations. To boot, Desperados 2 isn't easy and the quick-save key is a lifesaver. Therein lays its own problem: this kind of game demands careful planning and trial-and-error. The fact that you have to use the quick-save to make progress easier reveals the poor game design underneath.

Each character has specific actions only they can do, such as healing or tying up unconscious guards. The point is to avoid any serious trouble and take out guards one by one using the various abilities the group has on offer. It's a variation on chess, except that the other guys don't know you're coming. These types of experiences are meant to be tough, but also rewarding. Desperados 2's bias for more action, placing too much emphasis on gunfights and getting out of ambushes, ruins this aspect somewhat. If the controls were more responsive and action moves were better thought out to help avoid the sticky situations the game keeps dumping you into, Desperados 2 might be a lot of fun. Its shortcomings aren't huge and the 3rd person view is an interesting addition. But it's careless about the strategic element and often patches holes in the gameplay with overly tough situations. Unfortunately, this branch of the strategy family tree seems to have lost its direction. It's a noble and honest attempt at bringing something new to the genre, but perhaps sticking to the original formula instead and adding more intelligence to the bad guys would have been the way to go. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Suggested Retail Price
R299

■ Developer
Nival

■ Publisher
Ubisoft

■ Supplier
Megarom (011) 234-2680

■ Genre
Strategy

■ Age Restriction
10+

■ Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 1.3GHz
Video: 64MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 2GB HDD
CD/DVD: DVD-ROM
Internet: Online Play
Players: 4

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BOTTOM LINE

Visually it's an evolution, but Heroes of Might & Magic V takes the series back to the gameplay that made it popular. Fans will enjoy the new look, while new players should get a good introduction to the series.

74/100

Heroes of Might & Magic IV

Heroes of Might & Magic III

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC V

"HARK THE UNMISTAKABLE SOUND of a hero's hoof beats approach. Forsooth I believe this to be the fifth hero to pass through our village since time began.

His armour be brighter and stronger than the others, but beneath that gleaming breastplate beats a heart of a familiar nature…"

Heroes of Might and Magic is a long running fantasy turn-based strategy game spanning a massive twenty years since the first title appeared. And yet this, the fifth in the series, is the first to really bring with it any manner of dramatic changes to the appearance of the title.

Yes, Heroes of Might & Magic has gone 3D, and not merely in the tactical combat mode either. That was already done before Heroes of Might & Magic V arrived, but the World Map view itself and even the Town view are now 3D rendered screens into which you can zoom or pan or tilt your camera for a better view.

Now Heroes of Might & Magic is truly either a love-it-or-hate-it type of game, and we've come across far more people who are of the latter group than the former. A turn-based strategy game is, after all, a pretty small genre in terms of popularity with modern gamers. And even for those who enjoy this type of thing, Heroes of Might & Magic has not always been the first choice. You really need to be keen on turn-based gaming as well as a bit of a fantasy fanatic, it seems, to see beyond the slow pace of this series.

What neither side can deny is that the pace of a Heroes of Might & Magic game could not be further away from even the slowest tactical FPS sneaker. It is slow, each game may not quite be the length of a good game of that other turn-based icon *Civ*, but nonetheless, some patience and commitment is required if you're to progress very far at all.

Within the available multiplayer modes are hidden many of Heroes of Might & Magic V's additions over its predecessor, apart from the lovely graphics of course. You can play in either hot seat or LAN games, with game types including standard player versus everybody, player teams versus enemy squads, or the intriguing new Ghost mode. In this mode, Heroes of Might & Magic V introduces an interesting concept: the idea of combining your multiplayer battle with your current progress in the single-player campaign. Your ghost is able to traverse both worlds amongst other special capabilities, which makes for a rather confusing but also highly enjoyable multiplayer game. This mode is also ideal for players looking to speed things up a bit, as the amount of energy your ghost acquires each round depends on how quickly you

completed your previous turn – quite an innovative little twist.

New developers Nival Interactive (since the demise of poor old 3DO) has also seen fit to offer a semi real-time tactical combat mode to further broaden the appeal of this latest Heroes of Might & Magic, although we found this feature to be something of a letdown overall, and preferred to stick to the classical turn-based combat system.

Aside from these hit-and-miss changes, the core of Heroes of Might & Magic V is precisely the same as the previous games in the series. As the player, you need to manage your heroes and their armies, as well as choose upgrade paths for hero units as they gain experience and progress through their levels while capturing cities on the map. As before, your cities can build both units and new buildings, which in turn give you access to new units or more subtle bonuses like boosting morale for units garrisoned within the walls.

Your heroes' spell book, should you choose to pursue the path of magic rather than sheer might, can grow to a total of 40 spells in Heroes of Might & Magic V, while the number of abilities the player may choose from has grown to almost 200 in total, allowing you to create a truly custom and incredibly powerful, favourite hero unit. And the spell casting effects are easily the prettiest thing in the otherwise blocky combat view.

A deer on a unicorn. We've seen it all

Ballista hits Peasant: 14 damage dealt (5 died).

The interface has taken an interesting direction, becoming not so much slicker as simply more of the same with fewer tooltip pop-ups. These tips are there, but you have to right-click on the option to see them, which is fairly strange considering the fact that newbies to the game will already have a steep learning curve ahead of them. Enemy heroes don't suffer amateurs lightly and in skirmish battles in particular, will pounce on any mistake you make to wipe you from the magical lands.

Playing through the campaign mode itself represents a number of hours of gaming, As we said before, Heroes of Might & Magic is not a fast-paced game, so even though there are only a total of 30 missions (five missions each per chapter; six chapters in total), you won't finish the Heroes of Might & Magic campaigns in an evening, or even a weekend for that matter. This is great news for fans, but could scare casual gamers back to the multiplayer or skirmish battles instead.

What is very disappointing in the campaign modes are the cut-scenes. Done in the new 3D game engine itself, the movement of characters as the story unfolds is just about non-existent, and the developers didn't even bother trying with silly niceties like lip-syncing – in fact, with lip animations, period. Peculiarly, some of the smaller roles feature some fairly convincing voice-acting, but as a rule the main characters are abysmal.

To really appreciate the new interface, you ideally need to run it in high graphical detail. Here the weakness of going full 3D rears its head however, as a mid-range system just can't cope with the game when configured in this way, making an already slow process interminable and jerky – which you'd think wouldn't really be an issue considering the turn-based nature of the gameplay. It is, however, a problem when it causes such massive lag in the interface itself as it does in Heroes of Might & Magic, making moving your armies around the map a real chore.

In fact, the movement controls aren't great even at maximum framerates. Probably the most annoying trait is the fact that clicking twice on a location moves your hero to that spot, but clicking three times deletes the route entirely…. Quirky, or just plain painful?

So, the bottom line really is that if you've enjoyed Heroes of Might & Magic in the past, you'll live with the edgy interface, revel in the new graphics and possibly upgrade your PC to run at maximum detail without horrific interface lag. But if Heroes of Might & Magic has never really caught your fancy, Heroes of Might & Magic V includes nothing which will sway your opinion, upgraded visuals notwithstanding. **NAG**

HOMM goes back to the old school but adds a whole new feel to the game

BOTTOM LINE

Fans of relatively realistic World War II wargames, and history buffs who thrive on the events of that particular major conflict, are likely to enjoy this title, particularly if impressive graphics are desired. However, this particular theme has been rehashed *ad infinitum*, so keep this in mind when making a purchasing decision, or avoid this game altogether if you are tired of the Allies vs. Axis premise.

61/100

WW1 trenches

BETTER THAN

Codename: Panzers

WORSE THAN

TOP: Yes - it shoots quite far

LEFT: A fire in these frozen wastes - good idea

RUSH FOR BERLIN
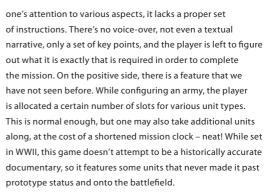
ONE WOULD THINK THAT by now the World War II theme would be wearing rather thin! But, alas, it seems that some European developers and publishers are thoroughly obsessed with that particular global conflict, and keep churning out games set within it. In particular, the real-time strategy and first-person shooter genres are rife with this sub-genre, with 'newer and better' titles being released to 'refresh' the sub-genre by applying advancements in computing technology.

Rush for Berlin deals with the later years of World War II, when the German juggernaut had stalled and started to be pushed back. The campaign starts with action on the Eastern Front, with the liberation of the besieged Stalingrad, and also deals with the European theatre of war, where Allied forces started achieving a major turning point with the landings on the Normandy coast. What ensued, more or less, was a race to be the first to seize Berlin, and hence this game's title.
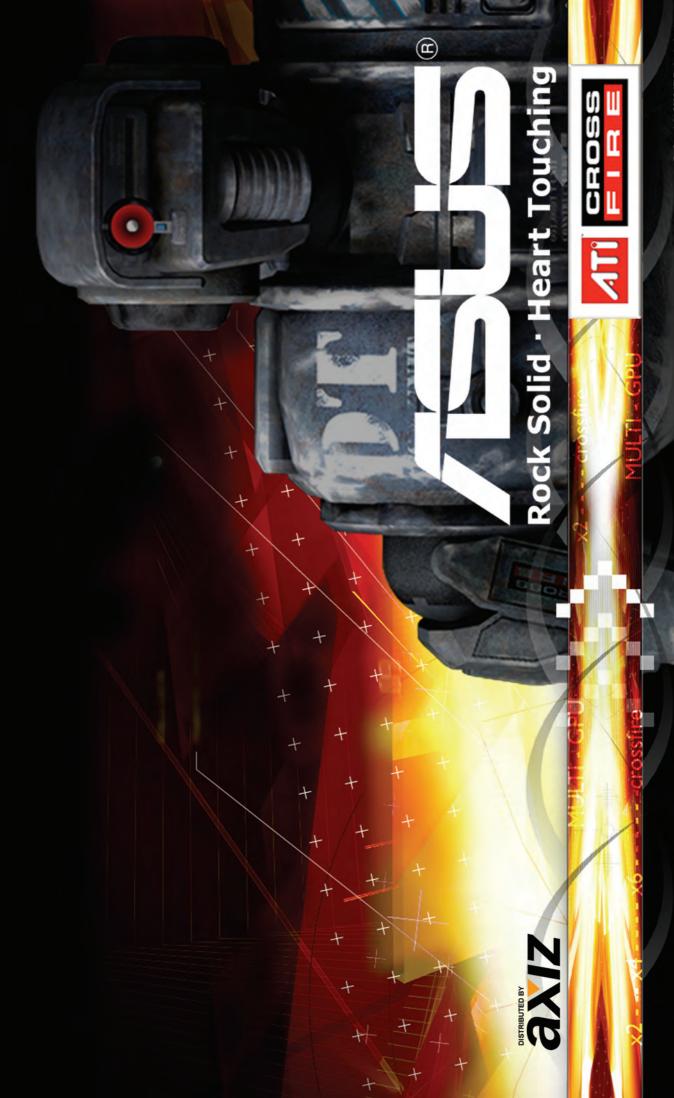
Upon starting the game for the first time, one is struck by the 'old Hollywood' feel of the main menu. This did, in fact, draw some attention from colleagues, who expressed hopes that this stylistic element would be carried through in the game itself to lend it a certain class. Sadly, this isn't the case, but we couldn't find any actual fault with the in-game graphics and sound. The development team behind Rush for Berlin also created the technically accomplished *Codename: Panzers* games, a fact that is very evident when playing *Rush for Berlin*. The way the environment and the units are modelled, as well as how buildings affect line of sight, are virtually identical to *Panzers*. The graphics have been slightly refined, naturally, but overall it is obvious that this is exactly the same engine at work.

The game features a tutorial mode, as is to be expected, which outlines the basic principles involved in playing the game. While this 'boot camp' is fairly instructive, the voice-acting is overbearingly and artificially appalling. But this is a superficial consideration, and soon left behind as the actual game itself is undertaken. Missions naturally start with a briefing. However, while the briefing is technically well presented with a 3D map and animations drawing

one's attention to various aspects, it lacks a proper set of instructions. There's no voice-over, not even a textual narrative, only a set of key points, and the player is left to figure out what it is exactly that is required in order to complete the mission. On the positive side, there is a feature that we have not seen before. While configuring an army, the player is allocated a certain number of slots for various unit types. This is normal enough, but one may also take additional units along, at the cost of a shortened mission clock – neat! While set in WWII, this game doesn't attempt to be a historically accurate documentary, so it features some units that never made it past prototype status and onto the battlefield.

In-game graphics are quite impressive, with lighting effects accurately reflecting prevailing conditions, and affecting visibility and unit abilities to some extent. The sound is adequate – nothing particularly groundbreaking here, but no actual problems either. Russian voice-acting is authentic, and it is apparent that Russian-speaking people were employed for this, although their turns of phrase are rather more modern than how the language was spoken sixty years ago.

Overall, there's little wrong with this game. However, flogging as it does a dead, or at least terminally tired, horse; it is unlikely to capture the imaginations of many, with the possible exception of some rabid World War II aficionados. Furthermore, the game dynamic isn't hugely exciting, and it seems that the developers are relying on the 'bling' factor of the graphics to sell it. One possible redeeming feature may be the considerably above-average artificial intelligence. **NAG**

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BOTTOM LINE

Need more SingStar? Tired of the previous expansions? Prefer Rock to anything else? SingStar Rocks! then.

65/100

SINGSTAR ROCKS!

FRANZ FERDINAND, KASABIAN, BLOC Party, Razorlight, and Nirvana. Yes, they were great bands with wonderful songs (depending on tastes), but they don't make for good Karaoke. Blondie and Girls Aloud make for a much better 'air' lead singer (as opposed to air-guitar), we feel, but since this expansion for SingStar is all about Rock, it only has Rock.
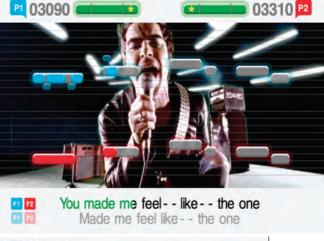
Stereophonics, Jet, The Subways, The Rolling Stones, The Bravery, Blur and others are slightly better for vocal misuse, and are also included on the Rocks! Track listing. Again, each song comes with its official music video.

The game itself, SingStar, is still as compelling and as fatally flawed as it has ever been, with the ratio of good to bad songs borderline bearable. Yes, the game is solid, but it's also now uninspired and lacks new features.

With Karaoke Revolution leading the charge so gallantly, it's amazing that Sony has somehow managed to avoid making the same advancements to this new(ish) videogame genre.

As something to play with extrovert friends, SingStar is still as enjoyable as ever. You sing into the USB microphones (duet or solos), and the game will score you on how well you 'match' octave lines on the screen. The words are timed to the song, so theoretically you'll always know what to sing next before the actual words appear in the song. Realistically, it's just not that easy if you don't know the songs at all.

Part of what makes karaoke enjoyable in the real world, is the lack of a scoring system. You should be doing it because you want to, not because a game has enticed you into it. Regardless, nights at home with two microphones and some friends make

SingStar worth more than it should be. If only they could bring the price of the expansions down to a more realistic and fair level.   **NAG**

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BOTTOM LINE

You Don't Know Jack still did it best, and better than Buzz! ever could.

65/100

BUZZ! THE BIG QUIZ

BACK IN 1995, THE game *You Don't Know Jack* combined wry sarcasm and Trivial Pursuit-style questions into a fun family experience long before *Weakest Link*.

Buzz! came to light as a music-centric quiz-show for the PS2 complete with Buzzer peripherals that were more plastic than peripheral really – they felt cheap and un-needed. The gamepad would have worked fine, and cost less.

Sony decided to sign up the jaw-flapping and overly annoying host of Buzz! again, along with two-dimensional assistant Rose for a new show format. This time around, the questions range across all topics and players now have more chances to steal points from each other. This is pretty indicative of the game's major failing: it doesn't work well as a standalone trivia 'quiz show' style game, so Sony has to resort to typical band aids to keep players interested, such as Pass The Bomb and the new Hitman round-type.

The execution of Buzz! The BIG Quiz is just as unforgivably cynical and lacklustre as the first Buzz was. The questions range from impossibly hard and esoteric, right down to downright kindergarten-level queries.

At the end of the day, the only people who could truly enjoy Buzz! The BIG Quiz are those who either don't expect quality from their entertainment, or simply don't know any better. This game could have been done better, much better, with little effort.

But if the family is over and you need to try and convince people that the PlayStation 2 is for 'everyone', whip this out and try to have some fun.   **NAG**

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JESTER
DEADPAN
COLDKILL

ECHO
104 m

x20/20   x5

DISMOUNT

BOTTOM LINE

Tactical shooters are taken another step forward, bringing more of a single-player aspect to the series. It's not perfect, but SOCOM 3 does enough things right to create a solid tactical experience.

70/100

SOCOM 3: U.S. NAVY SEALS

THE SOCOM SERIES, NOW in its third iteration, has enjoyed great popularity, both locally and overseas. Unfortunately, however, much of its allure has always been its online play mode, and owing to this, the single-player campaigns have usually been somewhat lacking in substance. To some degree, this has been corrected with SOCOM 3 which, although still heavily online-orientated, does offer a slightly more beefy single-player mode. This time around, the campaign takes you to locales including South Asia, North Africa, and Eastern Europe. The environments are huge, the controls are as precise as ever, and the variety of weapons (including handguns, submachine guns, rifles and many others), and modifications for them (silencers, bipods and so on) is simply staggering. The game does superbly to create a feeling of realism, particularly in the way your shooting accuracy is affected by whether you're moving, standing still, or lying prone on the ground. In addition, this time around, a variety of vehicles are at your disposal, including among them Jeeps, boats, trucks and tanks, each of which has different handling characteristics and armaments. Further expanding the play dynamic, particularly the stealth aspect thereof, is the ability to swim, which affords you another avenue of sneaking up on unsuspecting foes. Aside from being perhaps too short-lived, the only disappointing aspect of the play dynamic is the too-often-incompetent team-mate AI, which causes perpetual, if minimal, frustration throughout the game. Visually, SOCOM 3 is quite impressive, with the massive maps all showing great levels of detail, and well animated characters. The sound too is striking, with particularly notable voice-acting, and an epic, atmospheric score. Ultimately, SOCOM 3 provides an entertaining and deep experience, successfully combining elements of both a stealth- and a squad-based-shooter – it would have been nice had the single-player campaign been longer, but it's worthwhile nonetheless. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

A sometimes fun but overall frustrating and incoherent racing experience that's still in need of much refinement. Only die-hard fans will find reason to stick to it after the first few tries.

60/100

SONIC RIDERS

IT'S VIRTUALLY MANDATORY IN this day and age that any platform-game mascot character has its own racing title, and Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog is no exception. The basic premise behind Sonic Riders involves Sonic and friends (including such familiar faces as Knuckles, Tails, and even Shadow) entering a racing contest hosted by Dr. Eggman, with the aim of recovering the ever-elusive Chaos Emeralds. In a surprising twist, instead of piloting go-karts, or even simply running, the racing action all takes place on 'extreme gear', which translates into English as 'ultra-futuristic-hoverboards'. This allows for a number of interesting innovations, such as riding the trails of turbulence left in the wake of other characters for a speed boost, as well as being able to pull off some fairly basic tricks. To further complicate matters, you have an 'air meter', which is depleted by boosting or crashing into objects, and which is replenished by landing tricks – if it runs out, however, you'll have to jump off your board and proceed on foot, until you can make a pitstop to replenish your air. In a game that places so much emphasis on speed, this slowing of the game's pace can make the entire experience feel rather disjointed. Further dampening the experience is that the track design is perhaps a little too complex, and the controls are slightly too loose, often resulting in costly crashes and the associated frustration of losing races. The visuals are impressive enough, with the courses showing a good degree of variety, and the sound is reasonable, though not spectacular. Sonic Riders is a sometimes entertaining, if somewhat simplistic, racing title, which is sadly let down by too many poor design elements that make the entire experience too frustrating and disjointed to be completely enjoyable.

A cute mascot racer that manages to be fun at times but, unfortunately, also awfully frustrating at others. It shows ambition in all the wrong places, and although the game does indeed boast a few unique innovations that make for a slightly different experience than we're used to in this genre, there are too many elements of the play dynamic that just haven't been thought through enough to be entirely effective, and the result is a playing experience that can at best be described as being disjointed and stilted. It's certainly not bad in terms of presentation, with above par graphics and sound, and the inclusion of so many famous characters from Sega's Sonic franchise will give fans quite a thrill, but its value as a racing title is questionable in a genre that has some far better polished entries in it. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	**PSP**
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Suggested Retail Price
R299

■ Developer
Taito

■ Publisher
Ubisoft

■ Supplier
Megarom [011] 234-2680

■ Genre
Puzzle

■ Age Restriction
7+

■ Specifications
Memory: 288KB
Wireless: No
Online: Yes
Game Sharing: No

Help others help themselves
and look good while doing it

BOTTOM LINE

From an artistic perspective,
Exit pushes the boundaries in all
directions, but as a game offers no
real substantial depth or reward for
ploughing through a mostly trial and
error based platform puzzler. Highly
recommended at a budget price, but
will still leave you wanting more.

69/100

EXIT

GET OUT BEFORE THE time runs out and make sure you rescue your companions along the way. This is the premise behind Exit. The game has 100 different levels varying from simple training missions to really tricky setups that'll have you scratching your head and pounding your PSP in frustration. The levels feature various ideas ranging from a subway under water to a hospital quake, and are divided into 2D floors with interconnecting elevators, stairs and ropes, all featuring various dangers such as water, smoke and electricity. Each level has a miniature map highlighting the locations of all the important bits. The companions you have to rescue come in various shapes and sizes and include children, who are able to crawl through narrow sections, but aren't able to climb over all obstacles and larger characters - great for pushing boxes but not so great at moving quickly. As you progress through the training levels you'll discover that you can also instruct your companions to perform tasks within their capabilities. On later levels you'll have to master this extended companion control system to get everyone to safety, as working together is the only way to solve many of the puzzles. From an art direction perspective, Exit is really very stylish with great looking graphics, animations and sound effects – a real breath of fresh air. From a puzzle point of view, Exit is far too easy due to the constraints of each level, as there are only so many different combinations you can try until you finally get it. That said, some of the weight balancing puzzles require serious lateral thinking, and the number of possible combinations are endless. However, no matter how complex the level appears, it always boils down to repetitive retrying until you solve it. This style of trial and error play takes away from the game, as solving each puzzle is an eventuality, not an uncertainty. To make up for this, the game certainly throws enough levels at you with more available for download online. Getting through all 100 levels is going to take some time, and to add a little artificial longevity you unlock companion profiles as you complete levels. The profiles are gimmicky and offer nothing of substance for completing levels. Some of the best action, though, comes towards the end of the game with levels that are truly out of this world. At the end of the day, by relying on short puzzles that are ultimately too easy to complete due to the trial and error nature of the game, Exit offers little long-term satisfaction, but is fun while it lasts. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

A simple but highly effective and engrossing console RPG title that leaves the player little choice but to become totally smitten with its sheer beauty and accessibility. Stunning visuals, superb sound and an effective interface make this title a joy to play. Not to be missed – undoubtedly one of the finest RPGs in recent memory.

92/100

BETTER THAN
Suikoden IV

WORSE THAN
Final Fantasy XII?

So, did you buy it with the one horn or lose the other one?

DRAGON QUEST:
JOURNEY OF THE CURSED KING

DRAGON QUEST: JOURNEY OF the Cursed King is the latest offering from the console RPG deities at Square Enix, and it proves to be a title quite worthy of standing alongside the esteemed Final Fantasy series that its producer is so famous for. The storyline revolves around an evil jester named Dhoulmagus, who seizes a magical sceptre from the Kingdom of Trodain, leaving the castle in ruin as he sets off on his quest to, presumably, conquer the world. The only survivors of the incident are King Trode and his daughter, who have been transformed into a troll and a horse respectively, and a single member of the king's guard, whose role you assume. Accompanying you on your quest to track down and stop the evil magician is the rotund but strong Yangus and, later on, renegade religious knight Angelo, and the budding sorceress Jessica, seeking vengeance for her brother's death. Each of the characters has a very unique personality, which is revealed piece by piece as flashbacks as you progress through the game.

The world in which your adventure is set is, put quite simply, massive. It comprises several continents, each of which has its own share of forests, deserts, mountain ranges, as well as a number of towns, not to mention a myriad of side quests. In fact, it's quite conceivable that one could spend well over 80 hours playing through this title if you choose to complete all the optional challenges. In addition to the side quests, the game also provides a number of other ways to keep one entertained when one isn't crawling through a dungeon. Several towns have casinos within them, with three different games in which you can try your luck to expand your cash reserves. You also have access to a device known as an alchemy pot, which allows you to combine two or three items from your inventory in order to craft a new item – it's not overly complex, but it's certainly rewarding as successful manipulation of the alchemy pot yields some of the strongest items in the game.

The play dynamic is fairly standard console RPG fare, but it's certainly executed skilfully. Random battles are, of course, present, but occur with less frequency than in many other titles in this genre, and as such, they usually aren't terribly frustrating. The combat system itself is easy to use, with each character having access to a basic attack, a variety of spells, special abilities (gained by allocating skill points into one of five categories whenever your characters level up) and items from their inventory. Unfortunately you have to issue orders to all your characters at the start of each turn, and as such, there is always an element of guesswork involved when trying to plan out your turn.

Visually, Dragon Quest is little short of breathtaking. The varied landscapes are all rendered in superb detail, as are the effects accompanying spells and special abilities in combat. The characters themselves are all cell-shaded, and were designed by Akira Toriyama, the artist behind the Dragon Ball series. Each character is spectacularly detailed, and the designs do well to accentuate their personalities. Each of the abundance of monsters is also superbly crafted and animated, lending some excitement to encountering new foes in each area to which you travel.

The sound too is quite remarkable. Everything from the effects to the understated but effective score fits perfectly into place. Even more impressive is the voice acting, which brings each of the characters distinctly to life. Jessica's elegance, King Trode's haughtiness and Yangus's unrefined but well-natured Cockney accent all fit the characters to a tee.

In short, Dragon Quest: Journey of the Cursed King encompasses everything that the console RPG genre should be. It's understated and humble, but also undeniably endearing. The story, though not a masterpiece of complexity, is engrossing and compelling, and the characters are instantly likeable. The presentation too is outstanding. The clear-cut menu system, the simply awe-inspiring visual design and the remarkable voice acting all play their part in making this title stand out. The play dynamic manages to refrain from ever becoming convoluted, a common pitfall of titles in this genre, but at the same time it offers plenty of variety and never becomes tedious. It's accessible to newcomers to the console RPG genre, but also boasts enough depth, and a long enough adventure, to satisfy veterans. Ultimately, Dragon Quest is a sterling example of console RPG gaming, and is a title that any self-respecting PS2 owner should experience. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R199

Developer

Action Forms

Publisher

IC

Supplier

MegaRom 0861 987 363

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

18+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium I 1.8GHz
Video: 64MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 3.0 GB HDD
CD/DVD: CD-ROM
Internet: No
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

It's not good, it's not bad. It's cheap and it's budget. It really depends on your taste in the end.

80/100

VIVISECTOR

IT'S QUITE RARE TO find a game that, initially, comes across as quite terrible, only to have it get progressively better the further in you get. By the end of Vivisector, the entire experience climaxes into something quite special and rare – but few players will make it past the first hour.

It's not that Vivisector is actually a bad game. It's just very bipolar in its approach to the genre. With wild fluctuations between point-accuracy shooting and run-and-gun blast-a-thons, it's hard to place Vivisector anywhere on the large map that is the tapestry of FPS inbreeding. It borrows so many ideas from so many places, that half the time one has to wonder just how the game was ever finished.

The developers weren't terribly experienced – and it shows. Visually, the game is simplistic and it lacks the polish that large budgets will afford a game. In its defence however, Vivisector isn't being sold at full price. Instead, a direct-to-budget-price was adopted. You get your money's worth, as long as you're not expecting deathmatch or any kind of multiplayer.

In its country of origin Vivisector did very well. The ultra violent nature of the game combined with some innovative 'vivisection technology' let the game blast off chunks of flesh from enemies, giving the player immense satisfaction for the damage dealt. The creatures become more complex and involved as the game progresses, while the *Island of Dr Moreau* plotline ambles along at a decent pace.

Vivisector doesn't contain anything that hasn't been seen before, but does what it does well. As a result, only real Action

Furry carnage at high framerates

junkies will appreciate the title and its unexpected side-benefit to being produced on a tight budget (it never runs slower than 200 frames a second at full detail on most modern machines). **NAG**

REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R479.99

Developer
Sumo Digital

Publisher
Sega

Supplier
WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre
Racing

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
Online: Yes
Controllers: 1
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Fast, fun, no experience required racing is what OutRun 2006 is all about, and does this in style. Lively visuals, a nostalgic sound track, and simple, enjoyable play dynamic make this one of the better arcade racers in recent memory. Fans of the original will especially appreciate its authenticity.

74/100

Outrun (MegaDrive)

BETTER THAN

Burnout Revenge

WORSE THAN

OUTRUN 2006: COAST TO COAST

THE ORIGINAL *OUTRUN* WAS released by Sega all the way back in 1986, and it remains, arguably, one of the truest iterations of the arcade racing genre. It was easy to pick up and play, and provided an entertaining speed-fest which required relatively little thought. 20 years later, Sega has revived the franchise with OutRun 2006: Coast to Coast (not counting the 2004 Xbox release of *OutRun 2*, which the local gaming audience is unlikely to be familiar with) and, despite the obviously much-improved visuals and some new vehicles, the play dynamic remains faithful to the original *OutRun* title. Anyone who's ever played OutRun in an arcade, or even on Sega's MegaDrive, will undoubtedly get quite a nostalgic thrill out of seeing OutRun 2006 in action.

It features a line-up of 13 Ferraris (some of which have to be unlocked), including amongst them the classic 250 GTO, the Testarossa, the legendarily brutal F40, and even the stable's newest super car, the Enzo. The game also boasts a total of 30 different tracks, all of which are reminiscent of those found in the original title. Furthermore, throughout the game you'll earn OutRun Miles, which can be used as currency to unlock the more exotic vehicles, as well as mirror versions of the tracks.

The game comprises a number of modes, including the rudimentary time trial and standard race modes, as well as the slightly more offbeat 'Heart Attack' mode, where your female travelling companion issues tasks which you have to complete to keep her content. Her requests include such things as passing a certain number of vehicles within a time limit, or drifting through a number of corners.

The most extensive mode, however, is the Coast to Coast mode, where you make your way cross-country through a number of tracks. At the end of each track you're faced with a fork in the road, allowing you to progress along whichever route you choose. Each track will either present you with a standard race against the AI controlled rivals, or with objectives issued either by the Flagman, or your girlfriend. Here, however, the tasks are somewhat more outlandish, ranging from dribbling a giant beach ball down the road, to avoiding being abducted by UFOs hovering overhead. The objectives are entirely absurd, but they do well to complement the slightly less-than-serious tone of the entire title.

Of course, it goes without saying that the play dynamic is very much arcade orientated. You're able to slipstream behind opponents from a ridiculous distance behind them, you can make your vehicle drift for an absurdly long amount of time, and crashes send your car flipping way up in the air. It's certainly not Gran Turismo, but it does make for a light-hearted and enjoyable racing experience. Nonetheless, it needs to be said that despite the wide variety of tracks, vehicles and objectives on offer in the game, things do tend to eventually become slightly tedious, though it's still a fantastic title, especially when you've got a human opponent to time trial against.

In terms of visuals, OutRun 2006 is, in fact, quite stunning. Once again, it's not about realism, but the tracks and characters have a lively, cartoon-like feel to them. The vehicles are very well detailed, and the game displays some satisfying lighting effects. It also manages superbly to convey a real sense of speed as you zoom down the tracks. The sound effects and voice acting are also done well, and the soundtrack, which comprises both the original *OutRun* tracks (*Splash Wave*, anyone?), as well as remixes, is certain to bring back memories in anyone familiar with the original title.

OutRun 2006: Coast to Coast sets out to recapture the essence of Sega's original *OutRun* title, and it does just that. The game is easy to pick up, difficult to master, and the racing action is all about no-holds-barred speed. Much of the game's value lies in its simplicity, and although the play dynamic shows little variation, the action still manages to be strangely addictive. The visuals and sound are both of a very high standard, and the throwbacks to the original title are sure to please Sega devotees. If you're looking for a racing title that is about simply stepping on the accelerator and letting loose on the racetrack, then OutRun 2006: Coast to Coast should do well to satisfy your adrenaline thirst. It doesn't have the depth of *Gran Turismo*, but neither does it pretend to. It's just what it says on the box: good old fashioned arcade style racing! **NAG**

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CPU	AMD Socket 939		Intel Socket 775	
Chipset	NVIDIA nForce4 SLI x 16		NVIDIA nForce4 SLI x 16	
Memory	Dual DDR 400/333/266		Dual DDR2 667/533	
NVIDIA Scalable Link Interface (SLI™)	Dual PCI-E x16 VGA Cards @ x16 Speed			
Fanless Design	ASUS Two-Slot Thermal Design			
8-Phase Power	ASUS Stack Cool 2 & Heat Pipe Design			
Wireless LAN:	v		v	
WiFi-b/g™		v		v

Note: The specifications are subject to changes without notice.
For more information, please visit the company homepage at http://www.asus.com

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R335

Developer
Tecmo

Publisher
Tecmo

Supplier
Ster Kinekor [011] 445-7900

Genre
Action/Puzzle

Age Restriction
12+

Specifications
Online: No
Controllers: 1
Players: 1

BOTTOM LINE

A bit tough to fit into any specific genre. If you like puzzle games, or just enjoy seeing people get injured in creative ways, you'll probably like this. The gameplay may be too monotonous for some, and the plot rivals daytime soaps.

75/100

BETTER THAN
Spy vs. Spy (NES)
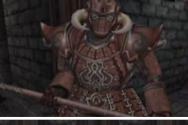
WORSE THAN
Dungeon Keeper (PC)

Using fire traps to break the ice was what made these parties interesting

TRAPT

TRAPT IS THE FOURTH game in Tecmo's Deception series; It started in 1996 on the original PlayStation, though the third game was over five years ago. However, the play mechanics have been finely tuned for this sequel, which can be an interesting diversion from the traditional types of games found on the PS2.

The game revolves around traps, but the plot to set the whole thing up is worthy of a daytime soap opera. You play a princess who has been falsely accused by her stepmother of killing the king. According to her, you've been possessed by the power of 'the fiend' (which you actually have), and she sends people after you to kill you. Throw in half a dozen other main characters with hidden agendas and you can see how this kind of thing gets out of hand quickly. Some of the cut-scenes make little sense, but fortunately they're never essential to the game itself.

Most of the game is spent running around rooms trying to lure enemies into the traps you place. This might sound complicated, but it has been very elegantly simplified into a fun to play action game. If you enjoy watching people get injured in creative ways, you'll probably have a great time.

There are only three types of traps: wall, ceiling, and floor. You can take three of each type of trap into a mission, so you sometimes need to choose wisely if you're facing enemies that resist certain types of traps with dodging, or defence against damage types like fire or electricity. Placing the traps is done in a very straightforward editor that pauses the game and lets you place the traps in the room using brightly coloured indicators of where the trap will be, what spaces on the grid it will affect, and which way it faces. Traps range from a simple arrow flying out of a slit or a wash pan dropping on someone's head, to flaming rocks, saw blades, explosives and electrocution devices. Newer traps are purchased as you go along.

Once you have traps placed, you can activate them with specific buttons on the PS2 controller. 'X' corresponds to floor traps, 'Square' to wall traps, and 'Triangle' to ceiling traps. 'Circle' pauses and brings up the editor. You can also look at the map and place traps in other rooms in advance, and then run there, luring the enemies to new types of doom. Each trap has stats including damage and recharge time, and they automatically recharge within a few seconds after use, letting you lure enemies into them again and again. Changing or moving traps in the editor is as simple as placing them, and you can come up with a lot of fun ideas and combos, which you get extra points for.

The rooms add an extra dimension to this with their own specific traps. Every room has its own traps that you can activate with the traps you place. Rooms also have a super trap called a 'Dark Illusion'. These can take a lot of work to set up, but are rewarding in that you get an over the top cut-scene of the trap, and it usually does extreme damage to enemies. Keys to additional rooms can be bought as you progress through the game.

Some elements of the game may seem a bit confusing at first, such as 'Ark' (experience points) and 'Warl' (currency to buy traps and rooms). Some of the Dark Illusions are also very hard to figure out, and you might need to resort to looking them up online to find them all. But fortunately the game is almost never frustrating, and it takes quite a while for leading unsuspecting people to their doom to get old. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50

■ Developer
Gameloft

■ Publisher
Gameloft

■ Supplier
Gameloft

■ Genre
Puzzle

■ Download Code
SMS: tribe 20359 to 40014
*NB:make sure you leave a space
after the word* **tribe**.
*Check www.thumbtribe.co.za
for phone compatability and
downloading instructions.*

PLATINUM SODUKO

THE NUMBERS CRAZE FROM Japan is still going strong. Not a bad thing considering everyone is trying to wrap their brains around sequences and not the latest tabloid news. Soduko is also a highly mobile game and several versions have already appeared on mobile platforms. Gameloft joins this puzzle genre with Platinum Soduko, a game with hundreds of puzzles to complete. The interface is very simple and well designed, while the game itself is a challenge for seasoned Soduko players, but can also introduce a complete beginner to the game. All this is complimented by Gameloft's staple Manga characters and sharp graphics. Marking temporary numbers is easy, keeping your focus on trying to balance the sequence instead of getting confused over what you changed when. The game also gives hints and advice to players who want or need it. Soduko is the one puzzle game that you should have on your phone, and Platinum Soduko is definitely one of the best on the market. **NAG**

Addictive and straight-forward Soduko action   **80/100**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50

■ Developer
Gameloft

■ Publisher
Gameloft

■ Supplier
Gameloft

■ Genre
Action

■ Download Code
SMS: tribe 20360 to 40014
*NB:make sure you leave a space
after the word* **tribe**.
*Check www.thumbtribe.co.za
for phone compatability and
downloading instructions.*

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III

APPARENTLY TOM CRUISE DOESN'T want his likeness to appear in a game, but fans of the movie still get to play as Ethan Hunt, mainly because on a mobile screen it's not obvious who the main character looks like. Fans of Gameloft's action games should also line up. The same quality that pushed games like King Kong, Splinter Cell and Prince of Persia into top 10 lists across the globe is obvious in MI3. The game spreads the movie events over 10 levels, most involving platform action playing as Hunt, while diversions come in things such as flying a helicopter in a top-down shoot-'em-up section. It's an action-heavy game, more so than what Gameloft has released before and you might finish it in less than two hours, but you'll likely go back for more. That said, the game is pretty short, but that's normal for Gameloft's more detailed games. **NAG**

Too short, but great while it lasts   **80/100**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50

■ Developer
Gameloft

■ Publisher
Gameloft

■ Supplier
Gameloft

■ Genre
Puzzle

■ Download Code
SMS: tribe 20361 to 40014
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after the word* **tribe**.
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LUMINES MOBILE

TETSUYA MIZUGUCHI IS ALREADY well-known for his quirky music-inspired games like Rex and Space Channel 5, not to mention the popular Lumines on the PSP. Lumines Mobile embraces most of the ideas behind its more powerful predecessor, except that the music and gameplay now operate independently. In the PSP version, what happened on the play field affected the soundtrack, but on a mobile phone the two are quite independent. That said, it's still a solid puzzle game. Beating Lumines involves dropping similarly coloured squares into groups to remove them. Diamonds provide chances to remove whole chunks of blocks, but this requires strategic thinking since you can stack yourself into a jam as well. It's a very simple game that gets pretty complicated after a while. It's also very addictive and though Lumines Mobile has a slower pace than the PSP version, it's just as easy and involving, guaranteed to suck away your time. **NAG**

A competent and highly addictive version of the game   **90/100**

NAG CLASSIC AWARD

BUDGET TOP 20

1. Far Cry
2. Age of Empires Gold Edition
3. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation
4. CSI: Miami
5. Silent Hunter III
6. Zoo Tycoon
7. Playboy The Mansion Gold Edition
8. The Settlers: Heritage of Kings
9. Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002
10. CSI: Dark Motives
11. Scrabble 2005 Edition
12. Brothers in Arms
13. Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield Gold Edition
14. Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow
15. Myst IV Revelation
16. Microsoft Train Simulator
17. Combat Flight Simulator 2
18. Impossible Creatures
19. Motocross Madness 2
20. Pacific Fighters

R99 each

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UBISOFT

GUILD WARS FACTIONS

WITH ITS REASONABLE PRICE and confounding lack of a monthly subscription fee, Guild Wars has become quite popular in South Africa. It has all the reasons for being popular locally: light on bandwidth, 56K modem friendly, no monthly fee which would require a credit card, fast patching and a healthy dose of cerebral Player vs. Player. By all accounts and using no actual statistical research at all, Guild Wars may just be the most popular MMORPG in South Africa.

And along comes Factions with its stand-alone saunter: it's not an expansion pack; it's more of a separate campaign that doesn't require the original Guild Wars (now referred to as Prophecies).

Now with Factions being stand-alone, you don't need Guild Wars to play it. Those who are playing Guild Wars don't have to buy Factions. The two can remain comfortably separate or, if the player owns both, can become connected. Having them both gives you an exceptional amount of content, but only having one is fine too. Players can travel back and forth between the continents of Tyria (Prophecies) and Cantha (Factions) and, if you own both, you'll even find quests that involve going from one to the other.

New in Factions are Alliances. Guilds can join together to form guild Alliances. Allied guilds share Alliance chat and can visit each other's guild halls. Alliances can also gain control of towns and outposts in Cantha by participating in Alliance battles. Winning a town gives that Alliance the ability to trigger events and gain access to exclusive areas.

Alliances belong to one of two factions: the Kurzick or the Luxon. Victory in an alliance battle earns faction points and members can spend their points individually, or they can add them to the alliance bank. This allows for control of towns and outposts. The outcome of these battles influences the progress of the war between the two factions. The current battle lines and indications of the control of cities and towns are always visible on the world map. Once again, Guild membership is a big part of the Guild Wars system.

Also new to Factions are a few new mission types. Challenge Missions are cooperative missions that involve specific scoring objectives, such as holding out against progressive waves of enemies. These even have high-score lists. Elite Missions require the most powerful alliances and are essentially the ultimate cooperative challenge, requiring teamwork way beyond the high-level raids in *World of Warcraft*. Competitive Missions pit multiple teams against each other to control resource points and achieve strategic victory. Alliance battles are large-scale, strategic Player vs. Player battles that allow factions to conquer new territory.

If you buy Factions, you can travel to Cantha with your Ascended characters from the original Prophecies campaign. All your items and every possession remain yours and remain usable even in Factions. The two continents are not mutually exclusive and don't have any kind of restrictions on which items can go where. The two new character classes, the Assassin and Ritualist, can also ponder back to Tyria to attempt missions there with the new abilities the classes bring.

You can only play the Assassin or Ritualist if you own Factions. You can, however, team up with Assassins and Ritualists who have Factions for cooperative missions or competitive matches. Factions and non-Factions characters can also trade items. If you link your Prophecies and Factions accounts, you will have a total of six character slots.

The maximum character level in Factions is still 20, the same as it was in Prophecies. ArenaNet is quite clear as to why:

"The level cap of 20 is a fundamental balance mechanism for the Guild Wars series, which offers games that revolve around player skill. The levelling system allows you to track your progress as you start a character. But by Level 20, your character is fully trained and is ready to experience the most exciting content in the game."

So love it or hate it, it seems that 20 is here to stay (for now).

To laundry list what's new in Factions, since as with any MMORPG, a simple review can never fully cover the girth of content: over 300 new skills have been added along with 90 new elite skills for the two new Factions professions, as well as the six core professions from Prophecies; around 50 new locations, story missions and combat arenas have been added, with 100 new creatures; and new types of guild halls can be bought while new pets spice up the life of any Ranger.

The two new classes themselves add complexity to the teamwork element of Guild Wars (a critical part of the game). The Ritualist is, in distillation, a turret generating machine. A Ritualist can summon stationary spirits that have various effects and/or attacks - great for players who like to defend areas or prefer indirect combat. The Assassin might as well have been lifted from *Diablo 2*'s expansion, *Lord of Destruction* – they play almost exactly the same. The

Assassin is fast and can link skill attacks together in a specific sequence to create devastating effects, at the cost of much lower health and a susceptibility to magic. Both of these professions are complex and deep, requiring detailed exploration of their pros and cons before players can decide if they like them or not.

On the surface, many people feel Guild Wars is shallow with no real depth to the combat or exploration. The exact opposite is true: Guild Wars is so complex that most players will never notice the more subtle underpinnings. It requires a certain level of cognitive consideration to understand that limiting the number of skills one can take into a quest/battle is actually a good thing. Having access to all skills at all times actually removes much strategy and limits the game to immediate-tactical play only. The '8 only' system is much more reminiscent of Collectable Card Games where players need to strategise over a long-term, as well as deal with immediate and now tactical considerations. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

If you loved Guild Wars, you'll love Factions. If you hated Guild Wars, you'll hate Factions.

80/100

BETTER THAN
Guild Wars (PC)

AS GOOD AS
World of Warcraft (PC)

LAZY GAMER'S GUIDE

GUILD WARS FACTIONS – COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Supplied by: Megarom
Internet: www.guildwars.com
RRP: R449

AFTER THE SLAP-IN-THE-FACE THAT was the Half-Life 2: Collector's Edition, one had to wonder if the idea of a Collector's Edition wasn't fading into obscurity. Then, not surprisingly from NCSoft, out comes the Guild Wars Factions Collector's Edition with everything but the partridge in the pear tree. Almost sounding like a street peddler selling magical potion, it slices and dices, bundled with a quality art book, mouse pad, Ritualist cloth and more.

Sturdy Wooden Box
If you're going to get a Collector's Edition, it had better come in a nice box to keep all the goodies safe and clean. The Factions Collector's Edition comes in a strong, thick box adorned with the female Ritualist.

Game Activation Card
While not a Collector's Edition exclusive, you need this card. It contains the serial key for your game.

Art Book
This coffee table book has stunning art from the game's pre-production and design phases, full colour glossy prints that elicit 'oohs' and 'aahs' from passers-by.
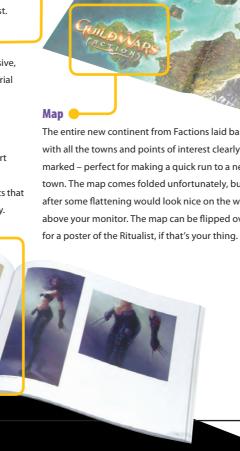
Map
The entire new continent from Factions laid bare, with all the towns and points of interest clearly marked – perfect for making a quick run to a new town. The map comes folded unfortunately, but after some flattening would look nice on the wall above your monitor. The map can be flipped over for a poster of the Ritualist, if that's your thing.

Mouse Pad
This glittery mouse pad isn't exactly ideal for mousing, but you can give it to a friend and make them feel very special.

Cloth
Practically useless (as far as we can tell), this Ritualist cloth is nice, soft and probably not for blowing your nose. Hang it on a wall, drape it over your cat, or use it to wipe greasy paw prints off of the art book.

HARDWARE

LITTLE TOUCHES

LITTLE THINGS REALLY COUNT. In all areas of life, the little things usually make the most impact, and end up being the most noticeable. PR and marketing teams endlessly focus on the big issues, and are indeed the teams that in effect create the big issues, through hype and advertising. And the small touches get lost in the translation.

But, we really should try to not get stuck in this trap, of not being able to see trees for the forests. Our subconscious always notices the tiny touches, whether positive or negative, and it's generally these touches that leave the most lasting impression.

Anyway, enjoy the great collection of hardware on the following pages, and keep your eye out for those touches that will make, or break, an otherwise perfectly ordinary product, game, movie, book, evening, or anything! These are often the reasons why we may wax lyrical about a product for two full pages, mention one small drawback, and end up giving a poor overall rating. Little things last…

Russell Bennett
[Hardware Editor]

CORRECTION

In our May 2006 H@rdcor3 Roundup (RAM Wars) we omitted some crucial details about the components tested, specifically pricing and suppliers. Here, then, is the list of RAM modules we looked at in May, with all the relevant details. Apologies to our suppliers for omitting this data.

RAM	Supplier	Pricing
Hynix PC3200 256MB	Axiz	R163 per 256MB module
Corsair PC3200C2 1GB	Rectron	R1,795
KingMax SuperRAM PC3200 1GB	Esquire	R695
Corsair XMS25400C4 1GB	Rectron	R1,095
Corsair XMS26400 PRO 1GB	Rectron	R1,595
KingMax DDR24200 1GB	Esquire	R695
KingMax DDR25400 1GB	Esquire	R775
Kingston HyperX PC5400 1GB	Axiz	R1,121
Corsair XMS28000UL 1GB	Rectron	N/A

The Corsair XMS28000UL 1GB modules are rather interesting. We received these 8000UL units from Rectron back when DDR2 first launched. In fact, we approached Rectron in desperation to get hold of DDR2 modules as we were receiving a glut of DDR2 boards to test and didn't have any of the DIMMs we needed, since they were so new. These 1,000MHz Corsair parts have been around since then, but are currently not available in the country - rather strange, considering that every other major DDR2 manufacturer is only getting to 1GHz speeds right now.

Finally, the two packages of RAM we received from Legend are priced differently based on which warranty period you purchase, hence the structure below:

RAM	Supplier	Warranty	Pricing
Legend PC3200 1GB	Legend	5 year	R367 per 512 MB
		3 year	R350 per 512 MB
Legend DDR25400 1GB	Legend	5 year	R420 per 512 MB
		3 year	R325 per 512 MB

OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

AT NAG, WE HAVE a very malleable approach to testing the latest hardware for you, and we define the test procedures on a more or less product by product basis. Due to the wide range of hardware we are asked to review, a single policy cannot be laid out and strictly adhered to.

In addition, the number of products that arrives at our office every month is so vast that it's only a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware which PC enthusiasts would like to find out more about.

Therefore, at NAG our review process, although rooted in a technical background and based on solid benchmark data, is largely objective and as such, is our objective opinion of the samples we receive. And we've been exposed to so much technology in our collective years in this vocation that these opinions are, we like to believe, among the most educated in the country.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles (*F.E.A.R.* and *X³: Reunion* are two that spring to mind right off the bat), and more specialised benchmarking suites like Everest (specifically for RAM performance) and SiSoft Sandra 2005, which is very good at measuring CPU performance.

What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these don't always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package which may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale.

After all, our goal is to provide you, the reader, with the most accurate information about how satisfied you will be with your purchase.

So enjoy reading about the latest and greatest hardware in the pages to follow, which we have slaved over so that you can make the most educated choice possible in your next hardware purchase.

100

103

105

104

AWARDS

THE NAG HARDWARE AWARD is reserved for those products that really blow us away, whether by virtue of sheer grunt, value for money, or pure unspecified sexiness. This award will only be bestowed upon products that really stand out, even to our somewhat jaded and cynical eyes, and should be considered among the primary choices when purchasing products in the respective categories. Products which receive this accolade are beyond doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!

THE ATI-OBLIVION 'CHUCK'

WHEN ATI ANNOUNCED ITS NOW-FAMOUS 'CHUCK' PATCH, SPECIFICALLY ALLOWING THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION TO RUN WITH BOTH HIGH DYNAMIC RANGE (HDR) LIGHTING AND ANTIALIASING AT THE SAME TIME, A FEAT WHICH STILL CANNOT BE REPLICATED BY THE GPU ARCHITECTURE OF THE COMPANY'S ONLY REAL COMPETITION, NVIDIA, IT GOT A LOT OF ATI FANS VERY EXCITED. AND IT GOT A LOT OF NVIDIA FAN'S GOING "SO WHAT?"

LUCKILY, THROUGH THE TIRELESS efforts of our global ATI PR specialist, Andrzej Bania, NAG was the only SA magazine to be given the opportunity to interview Neal Robison, global ATI director of Developer Relations. Neal, as his title suggests, is an unbelievably busy man, so we were very fortunate to get some of it even if the interview was conducted purely electronically. Many thanks to ATI and Andrzej for giving us this excellent opportunity to find out more about precisely what the 'Chuck' patch means in the GPU industry.

Simultaneous HDR and antialiasing: what are the benefits?
Neal: When you look at two of the most exciting advances in graphics

quality for games, HDR lighting and multisampling AA come to mind immediately. With the ATI Radeon X1000 family of graphics cards, we've brought both of these technologies together without significant performance penalties for PC gamers. Sacrificing one feature for the other isn't what a gamer should expect. This combination brings greater visual quality to the benefits of HDR lighting. These features provide a more realistic scene or object within a game. Developers can use some brand-new adaptive AA modes, plus standard multisampling AA and temporal AA in their games.

Was incorporating support for both of these features simultaneously a focus for ATI at the time of the X1000-series

That's right. Make sure you lock the gate good and solid

PATCH: THE REAL STORY

development? Or did it turn out this way 'by default', only to be capitalised on now when supporting games like Oblivion come out?

Neal: HDR and AA were designed for the X1000 family of ATI graphics cards from the very beginning. We introduced this feature to the press in September 2005, as a core-feature of the entire card family, not just the high-end cards of that series. I think it's taking a game like Oblivion to really show gamers what HDR plus AA can do to enhance a game.

Is this lack a 'weakness' in the architecture of your competitor? We note that even their brand-new monster, the 7900 GTX, suffers the exact same shortfall, which suggests that it's not simply a driver fix?

Neal: I think it's an absolute weakness in our competitor's architecture. Our competitor simply doesn't offer an HDR + AA solution - ATI does. I have to give tremendous credit to our GPU architects in championing this amazing feature a long time ago. The combination of HDR and antialiasing can really enhance a game, and ATI provides that feature in an elegant, easy-to-implement way. If our competition was to try and fake HDR + AA, I suppose they could, but either the performance would be miserable, or the resulting graphic quality wouldn't be enough to actually improve a game.

With your relationships with game developers, do you know of any more game titles heading our way in the near future which will further highlight this advantage?

Neal: Some people say I have the greatest job in the world. I have the opportunity to see most of the games that are currently in development. There are many more games that will support HDR + AA, being released throughout this year. Right now, there are several that can: Far Cry, Serious Sam 2, Age of Empires 3, Black & White 2, Half-Life 2: Lost Coast. Just to name a few.

Would the actual development of the game itself be heavily impacted for the title to support both HDR and AA?

Neal: That's a great question. Enabling HDR + AA in a game really is a simple process, but only if a game developer has gone through the process of integrating HDR into its graphics pipeline. I really appreciate the game developers who have taken the time to bring these types of rich graphics features to consumers. That way, integrating HDR and AA is easy, and the pay-off for consumers is huge.

Why was it so simple for 'Chuck' to enable both HDR and AA in Oblivion? Can you give us some details of the process involved, and is the claim of 12 hours of work true?

Neal: I can tell you that the claim of 12 hours work is true. It took a little more time than that, mostly due to testing the solution, but not much more. We have a pretty remarkable group of engineers who work on the ATI Catalyst driver. Trust me; they're pretty religious about releasing rock-solid drivers on a monthly basis. Chuck is a member of this amazing team. He's also a solid gamer and was disappointed that Oblivion wasn't taking advantage of the features that ATI cards could offer. Oblivion is a stunning game and he wanted to see it taken to the highest visual quality possible. On the Friday after the game was released here in the US, Chuck spent a few hours studying the game's rendering path. Over the weekend he thought about how he could design an HDR + AA path for Oblivion without breaking other programs. On Monday, our little 'ninja' programmer wrote all the code and started testing it. All-in-all, it took about 12 hours in total for designing and coding.

Perhaps a more important question. Why did Bethesda not simply allow both AA and HDR by default in the title? The company knows that there is hardware in the market capable of this.

Neal: Game developers have such a huge challenge these days to take advantage of all of the rich graphics features that the latest graphics cards offer. You wouldn't believe how hard the folks at ATI are working to make that job a little easier for developers. Help like code samples, technical support, and in some cases helping to write the actual game code. We worked closely with Bethesda to include this feature in Oblivion. However, Bethesda was working really, really hard to make the gameplay as good as it could be. They already had a significant challenge with the stunning graphics that were expected, and delivered, by Oblivion. In the end, the HDR + AA had to be dropped, so that the schedule and core features could be delivered for their consumers. Fortunately, 'Chuck' was able to figure out how to make it work, so that gamers could enjoy this amazing combination of graphics features.

In our market, the majority of gamers tend to swing in the direction of NVIDIA, touting price and lack of stability from ATI parts (and too frequent driver updates) as the reason for sticking to your competition's brand. Do you think that the ability to do both HDR and AA will impact the way these regular Joes purchase?

Neal: I certainly hope so! Here's a fantastic example of the quality that ATI provides. Not only do we focus on performance, but the visual quality is really important to us. That was one of the guiding principles in the design for this silicon. This is a solution that is only available on ATI and nowhere else.

I think it's funny that most of the gamers that I talk to are really happy about the stability of ATI's consistent driver updates. As I indicated earlier, that driver team is religious about releasing rock-solid driver updates on a consistent basis. Not whenever they want, but something that gamers can count on each and every month. In each driver release you can see exactly what features were worked on and how that will impact a gamer's experience.

And one final question. Do you have any comments or updates for the market, now that the competition has released a card which not only outperforms the X1900 in some circumstances, but also finally all but matches the renowned image quality of the ATI high-end solution?

Neal: I would have to disagree with the basis for your question. In measuring performance, I think that we'll always have a variety of results, depending on how the tests are performed: OpenGL vs. D3D drivers, memory configurations, etc. The X1900 has consistently performed well in performance tests. I've only seen a small incremental performance increase in our competition's latest card.

For image quality, I've been reading too many reviewers' complaints of our competition's card to feel that they match the world-famous image quality of the ATI X1000 family. I think they're going to have to try a little harder to reach ATI's quality level! **NAG**

CORE 2 DUO
A FIRST LOOK

Intel is back, in more ways than one. No longer will IT have to endure the shame of being slower in all the game benchmarks. With the Pentium 4 on the way to retirement and the architecture behind the Pentium II and III reborn, Core 2 is set to retake the performance crown for Intel once more.

W HILE INFORMATION IS ALL over the Internet, actual chips are still very rare. Some Websites have published benchmarks, but we've learned these are on pre-production samples leaked from system builders and not the final revision we'll be seeing soon. Intel recently flew journalists from around the world to get some hands-on benchmarking time with Core 2 systems. We managed to fight our way onto the list, and bring back the low-down on what's in store for gamers later this year.

THE MACHINE

Intel built the test machines themselves, but we were allowed to open them up and poke around to make sure there was no funny business going on. Intel also had two Athlon 64 FX-60s overclocked to 2.8GHz to simulate the upcoming FX-62. We didn't spot any irregularities with the systems, but based on what we know of the Core 2 design, it shouldn't have any problem winning this contest. One representative from Intel said: "If you're going to win in a fair fight anyway, why cheat to win by more and risk being exposed?"

The specifications of the test machine were as follows:
CPU: Intel Core 2 Duo 2.66GHz, 1,066MHz FSB, 4MB L2 cache
Motherboard: Intel D975XBX desktop motherboard
Memory: Dual channel DS Corsair 8500 1GB (2 x 512MB) DDR2 800MHz at 4-4-4-12 timings
Graphics cards: ATI Radeon X1900 CrossFire + X1900XTX PCI-E
Motherboard BIOS: BX97510J.86A.1073.2006.0427.1210
Graphics card driver: ATI Catalyst 6.3 Beta (8.230060131a)
Sound: Integrated Intel HD Audio
HDD: Maxtor Diamondmax 10 300GB NCQ SATA
Cooling: Stock Intel heatsink/fan
OS: Windows XP SP2 Pro

Intel mentioned that it was using a Beta version of ATI's drivers, which was being developed with support for the new CPU's features. Intel mentioned that this driver should be available by the time the new chips hit the market.

THE BENCHMARKS

There were a number of benchmarks and games pre-installed on the system. While we weren't allowed to install anything for fear of messing things up for the next set of journalists, there was certainly plenty to play with.

3DMark06
A score of 9,720 is quite good, as expected of an X1900 CrossFire setup, but the CPU score of 2,263 certainly contributed a lot.

Quake 4
For this test we ran four time-demo loops to get an average score. Then we did it again with SMP enabled to take advantage of the second core. The non-SMP score was 183.7fps, and with SMP it was 255.1fps.

F.E.A.R.
We ran *F.E.A.R.* with the CPU settings turned up and the resolution way down so we could be sure of stressing the Core 2 and not the graphics card. We got 110fps minimum, 243fps average, and 615fps maximum. 100% of the test was over 40fps.

Far Cry
For *Far Cry* we ran tests on three different maps, with four loops each time to get a good average framerate. On Research we got 397.92fps, on Training 372.84fps, and on Volcano 424.49fps.

Half-Life 2 Lost Coast
Half-Life 2's Lost Coast demo was run at default settings, with a result of 174.77fps.

Unreal Tournament 2004
UT2004 is traditionally an AMD stronghold. The P4 Extreme Edition chips have had little success versus the Athlon 64 FX chips on this one. But Core 2 seems to finally break through. We got 185.8fps on the flyby demo, 195.0fps on bots, and 110.5fps on assault.

There were also non-gaming benchmarks to run, such as PCMark05 and some office productivity benchmarks, but those won't be of much interest to NAG readers. (The PCMark05 score was 7,374 for those who are wondering.) From the results we saw in games, it definitely looks like Intel is back in the running for the fastest gaming CPUs on the market. AMD has its work cut out if it plans to fight for the performance crown.

MORE ABOUT CORE 2

So we've seen the Core 2 looks like it will deliver when it comes to gaming. The question might be, how and why a lower clockspeed than the Pentium 4? The explanation can get technical, but it basically boils down to the fact that the Core 2 is a more efficient design per MHz than the Pentium 4 was. Things like a shorter pipeline and more execution units mean that the new CPU can do more work each cycle than the P4 did, so it can achieve higher performance even at a lower speed.

There are other factors like the huge 4MB L2 cache and some new tricks Intel has cooked up for the new design. The Core 2 isn't just a re-branded Pentium III or even Pentium M design (which is now being called Core, without the 2). However, the two are much more similar than either is to the Pentium 4, which was a radical change designed to run at high speeds to achieve performance.

One good thing is that Intel isn't changing socket types with the new CPU. Many users got burned by the transition between the various Pentium 4 socket types, but Intel has decided to stick with its LGA 775 platform for now. Since most of these newer motherboards are already using things like PCI Express and DDR2, many users of recent boards will only need a BIOS update to install a Core 2. Others might need a new motherboard, but it won't be a complete change of memory and graphics card standards for many current Pentium 4 users. Since many AMD users will need to upgrade to new boards with DDR2 for the newer CPUs, Intel may be planning to try and convince them to move to Core 2, since they'll need to replace the same system components anyway. If Core 2 offers more performance and lower prices, it'll likely have some success.

As for when we'll actually see the new CPUs on the market, the information available is still a bit hazy. We suspect that the first parts will likely go to the bigger PC manufacturers starting sometime around July, and then it depends on how fast Intel can produce them to get them to the rest of the market. We're assured they'll be priced very competitively though, as Intel seems to have figured out it needs more than just performance to win over gamers. **NAG**

HARDWARE

ASUS AGEIA PHYSX BOARD

AGEIA PHYSX HAS LANDED in the country, and we were fortunate enough to be sent an Asus reference sample directly from the strangely-named company that has so quickly made it to the tips of every gamer's tongue - and it arrived weeks before Asus had its shipment of PhysX cards cleared by SA Customs.

The board itself isn't much to look at, but it is rather peculiar to be looking at an add-in card which features a completely solid back plate, devoid of any connections or distinguishing features, bar the Ageia PhysX logo emblazoned on the metal. Otherwise, the board is fairly unremarkable with an HSF arrangement that wouldn't look out of place on a mid-range graphics card, and the familiar Molex power connector feeding the PPU the power it requires.

This particular board was of the PCI variety, but the company also has PCI-E models hitting the streets as we write this article. And we all thought the PCI interface was only useful for legacy hardware by now…

After finding a free PCI slot on our test board, plugging the card into it and connecting power to the rear of the whole caboodle, we were ready to be blown away. Driver installation was quick and easy – the OS didn't even need to be rebooted before the card became operational. In fact, the driver implementation is almost shockingly mature for a first-generation offering. Driver updates did require that the earlier version be uninstalled before updating, but the driver installation procedure really just informs you of this fact before going ahead and performing the required operations for you, reinstalling the software, and still not requiring a restart.

Apart from the driver software itself, the software installs the PhysX engines themselves, which you can review installed versions of in the system control panel, and the control panel applet itself.

Through this applet the user is given access to an extended diagnostic routine, a built-in PhysX demo consisting of very simple balls being thrown at a very simple stack of boxes, and a PhysX card reset button which simply reboots the Ageia card itself in seconds, without affecting the machine.

That said however, this Asus board was amazingly stable. Not once in about three weeks of heavy, extensive testing did the system crash or lock-up due to the failure of this first-generation hardware component. Not bad at all for a first stab, but then Ageia knew it had to be right, right off the bat, to have any chance of gaining acceptance from the demanding gaming market.

The one thing still lacking from the PhysX equation is widespread support in real game titles in circulation right now. There's *Bet on Soldier*, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, and the latest title to be added to the list, *Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends*. Both the manufacturer and numerous development houses have pledged support for the PhysX model in future game releases, but for now this is really all we have to show off the hardware with (and the *CellFactor* demo, released to coincide with the release of the card, which requires the PPU hardware to so much as execute).

GRAW was our first stop for the purposes of this test. This game has turned out to be a bit of a disaster for Ageia thanks to the obsession of technical gaming journalists with framerates, as version 1.00 of the game actually suffers some major framerate degradation as soon as you try to run it with the PhysX card installed. Thankfully, the latest Ageia driver version combined with the 1.10 patch for GRAW resolves this issue rather effectively.

That said, it still isn't immediately apparent what you get for your investment - a not inconsiderable sum. The trouble with GRAW is that without a PhysX card installed, you do still get all the benefits of the Havok physics engine being calculated in software by your CPU. PhysX simply adds a few bolt-on effects, and increases the scale of the physics which the player sees and feels. So without a PhysX card,

VITAL INFO

■ Pros
• First of it's kind, Cellfactor

■ Cons
• Can't really deliver until games support it

■ Supplier
Corex [011] 707-5000/Axiz [011] 237-7000

■ Internet
www.corex.co.za/www.axiz.co.za

■ RRP
TBA

■ Reviewer
Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Physics Processor
Ageia PhysX

■ Manufacturing process
130nm

■ Memory
128MB GDDR3, 733MHz (1.46GHz effective)

■ Memory interface
128-bit

■ Internal memory bandwidth
2TB/sec

■ Interface
PCI 2.3

a grenade tossed into a group of crates will still throw the boxes around the playing area, while with PhysX the explosion will yield a lot more particles and the force on the boxes will be more severe and realistic. It isn't something the casual observer would even notice if they hadn't seen the game running without PhysX first.

That said, subtlety can be nice at times, and we must confess that after playing for a good few hours with PhysX doing its job, when you switch back to the regular Havok software mode alone, you constantly feel that there's something missing. And thanks to the 1.10 patch, the nasty stalls that version 1.00 suffered from due to the drastically increased number of particles floating about are for the most part eliminated – which isn't to say that PhysX will accelerate your GRAW game, since all the same Havok calculations need to take place in the background, but at least it doesn't actually slow the title down any more.

Which is a bit of a wash then. The PhysX effects are nice, but certainly not a necessity for enjoying the game.

On to *Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends* then to drive the new hardware into the market.

Sadly, this game really isn't going to do that. For some inexplicable reason the developers, Big Huge Games, appear to have implemented PhysX acceleration as only a means of helping out lower-end systems. But honestly, if you've shelled out the cash for the card you're not likely to have a sub-2GHz processor installed.

The physics effects in this RTS can be enabled, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, if you have a processor clocked at 2GHz or higher.
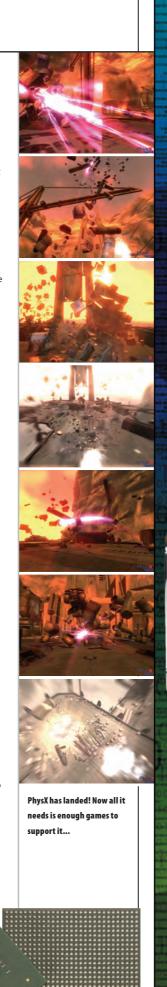
Having the actual card does have an almost imperceptible impact on the performance of the game, and adds some more seriously subtle particles to the mix whenever something explodes. The performance impact was only noticed when army sizes were at their 300-unit limit. Two such massive forces meeting complete with all the rag doll effects on infantry units that this clash entailed, caused our test rig to slow from the 31fps average it was merrily operating at down to 29fps, a tiny 2fps drop punctuated by very lows which you could feel. With a PhysX card in place, this average framerate never wavered, even in these enormous battles.

So is PhysX a bust then, relegated to the top pile of hype-turned-junk for 2006 so far? Well we know this is going to sound peculiar considering the negativity of the first parts of this article, but no: it doesn't mean that at all. In fact, Asus will have to pry this Ageia sample from our cold dead hands… Like we said, once you've played with the subtleties of a dedicated PPU turned on, you struggle to go back.

This is because, although the software which should be showing it off has failed, the hardware delivers. It's been left completely up to the *CellFactor* demo, a game dedicated wholly to using PhysX as an integral part of the game mechanic, to impress us, and fortunately it did. In fact, our gaming Ed commanded that I leave the room while he got his jollies with *CellFactor* the first time he saw it – not something he's known for doing very often. So it does work, and there is astonishment, awe and amazement right around the room when it does. Now we just need the games to start using these new capabilities. Like we said, once you've played with the subtleties of a dedicated PPU turned on, you struggle to go back. **NAG**

PhysX has landed! Now all it needs is enough games to support it…

ASUS N4L-VM DH

THERE'S NO DOUBT MANY have heard of, seen and maybe even used the latest Intel Core CPUs.

In essence, the Core CPUs are based on the outgoing Centrino processors, but feature a number of performance enhancing differences. More importantly, they bring multiple cores to the mobile market. These CPUs have proved more than a match for their desktop counterparts and regularly outperform them in most computing tasks. Making use of this power, however, meant that you had to purchase a notebook computer, which presented other problems such as graphic processing power, audio quality, connectivity, storage limitation and power to name a few.

A few motherboard manufacturers have decided to address this issue and have designed motherboards that support the mobile CPUs such as the Intel Core series, allowing you the benefits of both mobile and desktop worlds.

The Asus N4L-VM DH motherboard is one such motherboard that attempts this with less than satisfactory results.

The N4L-VM DH is based on the mobile version of Intel's 945 chipset, which features dual channel memory support, PCI Express connectivity and other desktop-orientated functionalities. The motherboard is marketed as the ideal solution for those who use computers as home entertainment centres, and in this sole respect the N4L-VM is the right motherboard. It offers 8-channel audio with Dolby Digital decoding and encoding features, which will come in handy when watching DVD video or listening to multi-channel audio formats. The quality is adequate at best despite the high-definition playback support, as high-definition CDs sound tinny and the mid-range fails to have any presence at all. This can be easily remedied by an add-on sound card, but that defeats the purpose of an integrated platform. The motherboard features an integrated Direct3D-capable graphics processor (in the form of the Intel 950 graphics processor) that allows hardware accelerated DVD

playback. It's nowhere near the quality of ATI's AVIVO or NVIDIA's PureVideo solutions, but is adequate given the quality of the other components.

FireWire connectivity enhances the whole package and will allow streaming of digital video from camcorders and other digital sources. So, every angle has been covered by Asus and even more has been added by the support for high-speed Gigabit Ethernet and one PCI Express 16x slot. This alone will allow the platform to take advantage of the latest graphic accelerators, truly completing the home entertainment platform.

At first glance the motherboard seems to have been thought out quite well. However, this isn't the case as you realise that as great as the features on the motherboard are, the target market would never purchase such a board. So why do we state this?

Well, the Intel Core CPUs will never be desktop processors. That privilege will be reserved for the Core 2 processor. So the only people who would truly be interested in the performance of this platform, along with the relevant CPUs, would be enthusiasts, and that's where the motherboard falls apart.

One full speed PCI Express slot eliminates any possibility of a dual GPU configuration, which no doubt is important to the enthusiasts competing or planning on competing in most benchmarks. The BIOS overclocking menu may as well not exist as it only has FSB and VDimm adjustments. Any setting above 182MHz on the FSB will render the system unable to boot, as the PCI/PCI-E frequency isn't locked - a throwback which reminds you why it was not such a great time to be an overclocker in the nineties.

If Asus was indeed aiming for less than mediocrity, it has succeeded with the N4L-VM DH. **NAG**

Mobile power for a desktop. Unfortunately it's not as good as it should be

ZBOARD FANG GAMEPAD

IDEAZON HAS AN INTERESTING goal in hindsight: they're trying to make PC gamers buy and use console-style peripherals. Nothing wrong with that, and they seem to be getting better and better at the idea.

The root of Ideazon's major uphill battle is that gamers are familiar with the standard keyboard, and have grown accustomed to its layout. Their Zboard product itself, while a nice idea, just made things too different for gamers to really get into, plus paying extra for each 'inset' for the Zboard was hard to swallow.

The FANG, developed in conjunction with the US Marines, is a much better idea and attempt at bringing an FPS-specific peripheral to the PC gaming market. Designed specifically for First/Third-Person Shooter and Action games, the FANG plugs into a USB port and sits next to your keyboard unobtrusively, provided you have a big enough area to work on. This could potentially be a problem at LAN parties where surface area is limited.

The FANG has the familiar Butterfly Movement Keys that Ideazon is so proud of, which are quite comfortable once you get used to them (once again, Ideazon is fighting the standard WSAD-style convention). The various action keys around the Butterfly are domed, making them very convenient to press with enough key-throw (how deep the key can be pressed in) for comfort.

Various other buttons, labelled for convenience, are dotted around the Butterfly in a reasonably intelligent fashion, although the quick-save and quick-load keys are a touch far for 'blind' presses.

The FANG can register up to seven simultaneous keystrokes, which may not sound that great, but is actually very helpful as most keyboards have problems with two or four keys down at the same time. You can, quite literally, jump, move forward, lean left, change weapons and shoot at the same time. The entire layout of the FANG is ambidextrous, so the jump buttons (simulated Spacebar) are mirrored on both sides. The entire design has a symmetry that is quite appreciated for its thoughtfulness.

The ZEngine software that comes bundled supplies a host of predefined key layouts, which can be easily swapped between or customised. It is here, however, that the failings of the FANG (and ultimately, the Zboard range too) become apparent. The ZEngine software is buggy and slightly unwieldy. Remapping keys on the FANG is a touch more difficult than would be preferred, while driver issues plague initial installation. The driver disc itself lacks a file that the installer needs, but that doesn't stop the FANG from being useable, nor does it prevent the ZEngine software from being installed.

As with all peripherals that try to improve upon convention, there is an initial learning period where you might wonder if re-learning the keyboard via a new layout is really worth it. The answer to that question depends entirely on how serious you take your gaming, or how tied to convention you are.

The FANG itself is indeed an improvement on the WSAD or ESDF keyboard movement scheme, but by what margin has yet to be determined. **NAG**
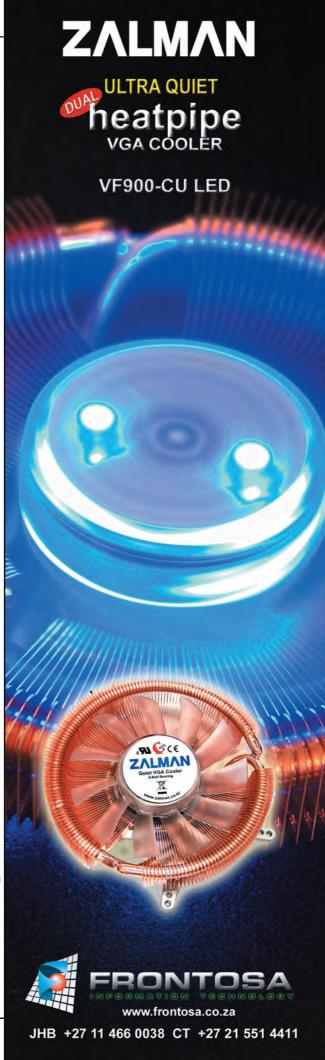
ZBoard, when a keyboard is just not good enough

THRUSTMASTER RGT PRO

THE THRUSTMASTER
RALLY GT (RGT)
on test here is the top of
the line steering wheel input device from Thrustmaster, and
therefore features all the best bits that the company could put
together into a single product.

The Thrustmaster Rally GT is a purely PC-based system, and
unlike the Rumble Force Thrustmaster wheel tested last month,
is a full-blooded force feedback (FFB) offering. In fact, the
Thrustmaster Rally GT is already well-known in the sim-racing
community around the world, although some limited supply
problems have already hampered its widespread distribution.

Interestingly, despite an extensive range of Ferrari-branded
merchandise, the Thrustmaster Rally GT carries no logo but
Thrustmaster's. Emblazoned in the centre of the black and
aluminium (not just aluminium-looking plastic either) steering
boss, the stylised 'T' looks great. The pedals are also proper
metal, albeit plates mounted on plastic stalks in a plastic
casing, and the shifter paddles as well as the levers for the 4th
and 5th progressive axes are all metal too.

Those levers, in fact, are completely unique to the
Thrustmaster Rally GT. It's one (or should that be two) of the
things that gives the Thrustmaster Rally GT its personality. It
has a total of five analogue progressive axes. The wheel itself
is one, there's one for throttle and another for brake, and in
this case, two more are mounted on easily-reachable levers
beneath the shifters for you to assign as you see fit (clutch
control and handbrake are the recommended usage).

The wheel rim itself is small, quite chunky and clearly
a firmly attached part of the whole, and the single-clamp
mounting mechanism may be a tad tough to tighten, but holds
on well when locked.

All of this adds up to a superb driving game experience.
The Thrustmaster Rally GT has seven additional buttons and
a D-pad mapped as default to be a POV hat on the spokes of
the wheel itself, with yet another two buttons mounted just
beneath the sequential stick shifter which can be used
to change gears instead of the paddles.

It does add to the sense of control you have over your
virtual vehicle, particularly in a well-simulated physics engine
complete with force feedback which the Thrustmaster Rally GT
engine translates beautifully into artificial 'feel' being filtered
through to your fingertips.

We would have preferred the pedal set to have included
something to keep it more firmly in position, like the carpet-
grabbing strip of tiny hooks attached to the Logitech MOMO
pedals, and had hoped the piercing red LED glowing from the
unit to at least diminish with power disconnected. But despite
these minor annoyances and the dead zone adjustment
required, we have no qualms naming this the best FFB wheel
available in the country today.

It isn't particularly cheap though, but to us the price
differential is worth it if you must have the absolute best. If
simply a 'very good' wheel will be fine for your needs, save
some cash and get a Logitech MOMO Force.   **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros
• Construction quality
• Five analogue axes
■ Cons
• Not all race games support the five axes
■ Supplier
www.bowline.co.za
■ Internet
www.thrustmaster.com
■ RRP
R1,459
■ Reviewer
Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Exclusive '5 Axes'
Wheel + 2 independent pedals = 3 axes
Two independent progressive levers
= 2 axes
**■ For the first time you can use
your:**
Progressive handbrake
Progressive clutch
Progressive left and right inside view

**Serious racing fanatics need
look no further for a steering
peripheral**

PENTIUM D 950

MOST OF US TEND to expect to find the best bang for our buck towards the lower end of the price/performance spectrum. The Pentium D 805, for instance, and Opteron 1-series became famous because people didn't have to pay a lot for them, but a little tweaking could extract performance way beyond the price.

However, sometimes bargains do appear at differing price points. It just takes watching the market to know about these things. For instance, Core 2 is just around the corner, Core is here already, and Pentium the brand has been dropped. The result? Major price cuts on Pentium 4 parts right now.

We know a lot has been said about how poor the NetBurst architecture is, or was. But at the end of the day, some of these chips are now offering pretty decent performance, despite the inefficiencies, at seriously affordable prices. Besides, if you get a 975-based board for it, you'll be able to upgrade to Core 2 with at most a BIOS update, according to Intel.

On review here is the Pentium D 950. It's just one paltry step down from the current top of the range of the Pentium D dual core line-up, now based on a Presler core and a, relatively, new 65nm architecture. Have you ever heard of the 955 Extreme Edition (XE), which features 3.43GHz per core, 2MB L2 cache per core, and the EE's 1,066MHz FSB? Change the FSB to 800MHz, and lose 0.03GHz per core, and that's pretty much what we have here.

There's some definite power under the hood. In 3DMark06, for instance, it managed 1,892 for its CPU score. SiSoft says it's good for 20,866 MIPS and 14,900 MFLOPS - higher than an Athlon 64 X2 4800+.

And have you seen what they are now charging for these little beauties. That's right, in the region of R2,700. Even though the architecture it's based on is yesterday's news, it's yesterday's hottest news technically, and it's now going for a steal.

If you have an LGA775 board, and are perhaps struggling along with the old 90nm single core NetBurst cores, you seriously need to consider an upgrade like this to make the move to dual core. Core 2 is going to be costly at launch, but an upgrade like this won't dent the bank too much, and get you a system that'll still be useable in 12–18 months.

It may have quickly become ignoble of late, but the Pentium can still pull some things off very quickly. And with a decent set of subsystems supporting it, it's a perfectly viable gaming CPU too. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ **Pros**
• A positive performance bargain right now

■ **Cons**
• NetBurst architecture

■ **Supplier**
Axiz [011] 237-7000

■ **Internet**
www.intel.com

■ **RRP**
R2,695

■ **Reviewer**
Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ **Architecture**
65nm, LGA775

■ **Cache**
2 x 2MB L2

■ **Clock**
800MHz

■ **FSB**
2 x PCI-E x16, 2 x PCI-E x1, 2 x PCI

■ **Number of cores**
2

■ **Extra features**
Intel Virtualisation Technology, EM64T, Execute Disable Bit

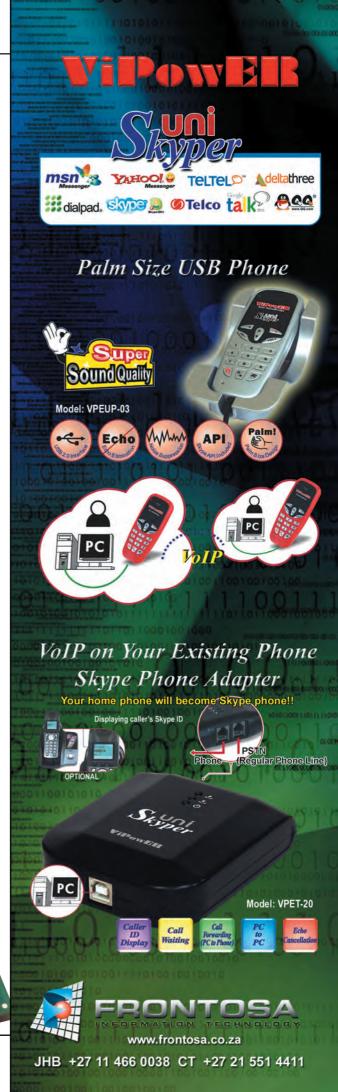**It's not on the bleeding edge, but the Pentium D has serious bang for your buck**

MULTIPLAYER
V-SPORTS ALL STARS AT E3

Competitive gaming arrives at E3 with the GGL V-Sports All Stars exhibition

THE ELECTRONIC ENTERTAINMENT EXPO (E3) is not usually aimed at competitive gamers, but in the interests of bringing the burgeoning sport before the eyes of the mainstream multitude, the Global Gaming League (GGL) have established the "V-Sports All Stars" exhibition. Every year, via the Web, the public vote for their favourite players from a list of nominees, and those with the most votes in each game type are flown to Los Angeles.

This year, the chosen games were Quake 4, Warcraft III and Counter-Strike 1.6. CPL Winter winner Anton "Cooller" Singov (Russia) and runner-up Johan "Toxic" Quick (Sweden), alongside the USA's Jason "Socrates" Sylka and Jared "Chaoticz" Cugno were

the favourites in Quake 4. In Warcraft III, fresh off their first and second place at the prestigious WEG Masters tournament, Yoan "Tod" Merlo (France) and Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen (Netherlands) were easy choices. Completing the strategy line-up were South Korean stars Jaeho "Moon" Jang and Jaewook "Lucifer" Ro. Counter-Strike, following a slightly different format, was divided into two teams – America and Europe – each composed of top players such as SK Gaming's Abdisamad "Spawn" Mohamed for Europe and Complexity's Danny "fRod" Montaner for America.

Except for Counter-Strike, where only two matches were played (the Americans demolished the

Europeans 16-3 on de_nuke and 16-2 on de_inferno) the players all faced off in a round-robin tournament, playing two games against each opponent. This format allowed for several draws, and almost saw the Warcraft III competition end in a four-way tie. Grubby, however, put an end to that possibility by winning his final match against Lucifer two maps to zero and claiming the overall V-Sports All Stars title. In Quake 4, Toxic was unstoppable, dropping only one map to his fellow European, Cooller, who finished in second place. In an ironic twist of fate, Trans-Atlantic Showdown champion Socrates looked particularly off form, failing to win a single game. **[vsports.ggl.com]**

WEG MASTERS ROUNDUP

AFTER THREE REGULAR SEASONS, the World E-Sports Games culminated this month in a grand final event. Eight international Counter-Strike teams and eight Warcraft III players were invited, based on their status in the global community and their performance in previous WEG tournaments. The event then ran for two weeks in Hangzhou, China, and was broadcast live on Chinese and South Korean television.

WEG has often been criticised for their coverage model, which does not include HLTV / Waaagh!TV Internet broadcasting or the release of in-game replays. The only option for international viewers is to connect to a live video stream (which is often unwatchable due to lag) or to download poor quality VODs after the matches have been played. Despite these criticisms, however, the WEG Masters attracted immense worldwide interest, even if it was just to follow the scores.

In the Counter-Strike tournament, the Asian teams finally took the spotlight. WNV Gaming (China) and Hacker Project (South Korea) showed exceptional skill throughout, knocking out hefty Europeans such as SK Gaming and Team NOA. With SK and NOA out so early, many commentators predicted a clear road ahead for the Americans from Complexity, who had recently won the GGL's Trans-Atlantic Showdown. This prediction appeared to be nearing reality, for Complexity did indeed reach the final, defeating the Norwegians from Catch Gamer in the first semi-final. Meanwhile, WNV and Hacker Project faced off in the second semi-final, with WNV winning convincingly.

Thus the stage was set for the final everyone had been hoping for. But WNV proved too strong for even Complexity, crushing them on de_inferno (16-1) and taking de_nuke comfortably (16-7). The impact of this victory was reflected not only in their $70,000 pay check, but also in Gotfrag.com's most recent world rankings, where WNV emerged the clear number one.

As for Warcraft III, the groups were so competitive that it was difficult to speak of favourites at all, except perhaps that the unspoken rivalry between Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen (Netherlands) and Jaeho "Moon" Jang (South Korea) was at the back of everyone's mind. Many were dreaming of the two meeting in the finals, but an early loss to China's Xiaofeng "Sky" Li saw Grubby only finishing second in his group, which meant he had to face Moon in the semi-finals. Grubby had never before beaten the South Korean star, a fact many of his fans blamed on the weakness of Grubby's race (Orc) against Moon's (Night Elf), but the Dutchman announced that he had prepared a "special strategy."

Grubby's new tactic worked superbly, and this time Moon was unable to counter the Orcish Horde. Grubby won 3-1 in maps, proving that preparation is often the most important factor. However, his momentum did not last, as his team-mate and friend, the Frenchman Yoan "Tod" Merlo, came into the final looking as strong as anyone in Warcraft III has ever looked. Having just defeated Sky with a staggering 3-0 score, Tod had no problems winning the final against Grubby (3-1 in maps) and taking home the $30,000 prize.

[www.weglive.com]

AXIZ AND IMPETUS IT SUPPORT TOP GAMERS

NOT ONLY DO ARENA 77 manage gaming events, they also act as corporate brokers for players seeking financial support. Noteworthy partnerships formed in the past include Shuttle's extensive sponsorship of the former *Counter-Strike* team Evolve and AMD's involvement with the old Damage Control. But in the last two months, two new companies have come to the table and offered their assistance to South Africa's top e-sportsmen.

The first pairing is that of *Quake*'s legendary champion, Stephen "Ph4ntom" Cloete, with Impetus, an IT solutions provider. "I was impressed at how soon there was a contract for me to sign," writes Ph4ntom on his online blog. "This gave me such an enlightening feeling as there was never any mention of a contract in all my previous attempts." The deal includes paid travel and accommodation to attend gaming events in Gauteng (Stephen lives in Cape Town), as well as a custom-built PC, known as the Impetus Fireball. In return, Ph4ntom will represent Impetus at all gaming events, as well as assisting in the design of their gaming PCs.

The second agreement has been reached between ESWC *Counter-Strike* winners Damage Control and the PC component distribution company Axiz. With a sponsorship value in excess of R70 000, Axiz has committed to supporting Damage Control for a full year, replacing components as and when is necessary. "In extreme gaming mode, speed and reliability become critical components for success. Our ASUS range of motherboards and graphics cards, coupled with AMD and Kingston Hyper X gaming memory, resulted in five powerful machines for the clan," says Kobus de Beer, Asus product manager at Axiz.

NAG LAN @ RAGE – AN INTRODUCTION

I'VE BEEN GRANTED SPACE in three issues leading up to rAge to try and highlight most of the information that you'll require to make this event unforgettable in a positive sense. I'll try and cover the basics with regard to safeguarding your PC from viruses. I will also try and ensure that you have a good understanding of how the whole LAN event is structured, from opening times to closing times and everything in-between.

For some of you this might be a first event, others are well versed in the ways of the cyber soldier. I find that even people who have attended LANs and these big national events sometimes need a little brushing up on LAN etiquette. What's acceptable behaviour, and what constitutes being an annoyance. Some behaviour has clear definitions within our society, while others are more of a personal nature. The items on a personal level can become very complicated to resolve, since they require mediation and mutual respect between the parties. Due to this difficulty, I will try and cover the most basic rules that people transgress.

When you're playing on any server, whether online or at a LAN, your use of language should always be acceptable. This event is open to all ages, and we have participants from the age of seven to 52 years who join the servers. It would be quite obvious that the skill level is also as diverse as the age. Some of the more experienced players tend to get abusive towards the newer players and make their disdain quite verbal. Although the server allows you some anonymity, it's still a public place governed by normal acceptable behaviour. If you feel that new players are killing the game, start a server that is password protected that explains in the host name that the server is intended for the pros only. On the other hand, if you see a server that states in the host name 'Newbie Server', don't try and showcase your skill by joining the server. You are killing the fun factor for them, and somewhere along the line you too were a newbie.

While on the topic of language, this is a very common problem. Your nickname shouldn't mock or be outright blasphemous towards gender, creed, faith, political affiliation or towards any person specifically. Using swear words is also not acceptable, even if it is cleverly disguised as '#$%^@'or whatever sign. Swearing in the servers because somebody did something in a manner different than yours doesn't constitute a reason for swearing. This is plain rude and unwelcome. Innocent mocking due to your über frag-skill is acceptable, if done with taste without being obsessive about it.

When joining servers, and the people in the server ask you to leave because it is a clan match.

it would be appropriate to join the spectators or just leave the server. It should however be kept in mind that these matches should normally occur as privately hosted servers, and not in the general hosted servers. When joining games that are team-orientated, with some leader structure in place, don't go about your mission in a solo fashion. This is very frustrating for the other players, and might put your team at a very big disadvantage.

Commentating on a match that you are spectating should also be done with respect to the players playing. Giving away positions or strategies while spectating isn't appreciated. Flooding the server with your bound comment is also very annoying. People can become very engrossed in the game that they are playing and then let off steam when they fail to achieve their goal. Hitting the table or keyboard, loudly swearing or similar distasteful behaviour isn't suited for a public event of this nature. Try and keep your emotions in control, and if required, go for a smoke and calm down. The whole point of playing games is to have fun. Don't let that fundamental principle slip past you.

Since this event is stretched over three days, people are bound to become hungry. Thus, most people grab a burger and Coke and sit down at their

PCs to enjoy the meal. One should keep in mind that other people share a fairly small space on the work surface with you. Don't leave open drinks that can spill on the table. This might spell the end of a great event for either of you when something gets knocked over, since liquids and power don't mix well. Also try and clean up after yourself. When you are done eating, place the leftovers and litter in the provided trashcans. Common sense dictates that this also includes the outside area where people usually leave their mess when taking a smoke break.

No drugs are permitted in or about The Dome and no person under the influence of said will be allowed access to the event. No smoking is permitted in The Dome.

We are all friends, competitors and members under the rAge experience. Foster goodwill, good sportsmanship, share your abilities, gaming experiences and stories, tactics, and humour with others, and enjoy the best LAN event that South Africa has ever seen.

Forums for discussion on the NAG LAN @ rAge are open at www.nag.co.za.

ShadowOrphan
VC

The NAG LAN will once again be in the capable hands of the VC crew

EVE ONLINE WOWS AUDIENCE WITH NEW KALI CONTENT AT E3

DEVELOPERS OF THE INSIDIOUSLY addictive space-based MMORPG EVE Online, CCP, revealed a raft of updates to this huge online title at this year's ever-spectacular E3.

Although EVE players have known of the next major revision to the title, called Kali, for a few months already (since before the Blood patch even of Q1), this was the first time that the touted new, higher detail textures have actually been presented. As the new visuals are the most immediately noticeable, the stunning new array of ship and station models wowed the audience at the Expo with the addition of high-end DX9 technologies like HDR and soft self-shadowing, but changes under the skin of EVE Online are potentially more interesting. That said, the new ship textures are great to look at and bring EVE – already a great-looking MMO - up to a whole new graphical plane.

Also part of the Kali expansion, but due to be implemented in Q2 of this year still, the company announced that it had been working closely with VoIP communications developers Vivox to integrate this communications platform into the game interface itself. Voice-based communications are a massive part of the game, and using tools like TeamSpeak is essential for PvP victory and large-scale fleet engagements. However the announcement has caused a backlash in the EVE community itself, with many players concerned that the addition of voice traffic to the heavily loaded EVE central cluster, Tranquility, will reintroduce substantial lag to the game which was alleviated with the upgrade of Tranquility to 64-bit hardware in March this year. The Tranquility cluster already has to support peak concurrent connections in excess of 25, 000 users – so adding voice traffic will increase network load going to the cluster dramatically.

In addition, Kali will introduce a raft of new content to the already rich EVE universe, including Tier 3 battleships, new weapons and new skills to train. The final element of the Kali deployment, due by the end of this year, will be an all-new Advanced Reactive Content System (ARCS), which will make the political and physical boundaries of the huge EVE universe dictated entirely by player actions – ultimately forming the future of the game universe and its supporting storyline based wholly on large scale player operations.

HALF-LIFE DEATHMATCH: SOURCE

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1, the first of three episodic releases that continue the story started in Half-Life and *Half-Life 2*, comes with a fun free addition (once you've paid the $20 for Episode 1).

Half-Life Deathmatch: Source is a recreation of the first multiplayer game set in the *Half-Life* universe. It features all the classic weapons and most-played maps, now running on the Source engine with all the advanced server bells and whistles that the Source engine has, including the ability to find hosted servers easily.

Back in the day, Half-Life's deathmatch made as big a splash as *Quake*, but didn't take the same 'competitive' route for some inexplicable reason. Regardless, seeing its return marks a happy time for those who were sad to see the *Half-Life* deathmatch server lists dwindle into nothingness, replaced by *Counter-Strike* and *Quake*.

While Half-Life Deathmatch: Source lacks the physical improvements allotted to *Counter-Strike: Source*, such improvements may be on the horizon depending on the popularity of Deathmatch: Source. Most gamers have high hopes that the advanced physics system in *Half-Life 2*'s Deathmatch may be incorporated at a future time into the classic Deathmatch.

Half-Life 2 isn't required to play Episode 1, or Deathmatch: Source, but you have to purchase Episode 1, which also gives you Half-Life: Deathmatch for free.

THE MMOS OF E3 2006

IT'S ABOUT TIME THE MMO genre started picking up the pace a little – every game genre needs a healthy rate of release, or the genre will simply never evolve. E3 2006 saw the announcement (or reminder) of many new MMOs, a pleasing wide range of genres and styles that should give everyone something to enjoy (provided you get over the monthly fee psychosis).

AGE OF CONAN

www.ageofconan.com

Impressions: Combat heavy with a lush, beautiful world full of bandits and warriors, spilled blood and the lament of your enemies. You can strike all the enemies around you at once with a swing, instead of the usual 'you hit, I hit' system, which is a pleasant change. Motion captured horse animations give the creatures, which are quite important in the game, a natural sense of awe and beauty – the development team seem really enthralled with their work.

Hot Topic: Beheadings and rich lore are sure to keep fans happy.

DREAMLORDS

www.dreamlords.com

Impressions: You lord over your own personal island and challenge players from around the globe to strategy-based battles with fantasy units. Warfare continues over a few months and can actually be won. The 100% independent development team consider this their dream game, and it shows that they're quite anxious to unveil their dream to the public.

Hot Topic: Fresh ideas – the RTS genre hasn't been overdone in the MMO market.

DUNGEON RUNNERS

www.dungeonrunners.com

Impressions: In this free MMO, you'll meet up with friends in towns and venture into dungeons for quick pick-up-and-play, hack-and-slash adventuring. Essentially a Diablo 2 clone, but online and MMO – a solo play option should keep players busy during their lunch break.

Hot Topic: Blizzard-like art direction and free to play.

EXTEEL

www.plaync.com/us/games/exteel/

Impressions: This fast-paced, anime-styled Player vs. Player mech-battle MMO combines the ideas behind Armoured Core with Robotech. Shiny colourful artwork and high-octane explosions, along with persistent mech creation should be a hit with fans of this idea.

Hot Topic: The mechs look good, the huge weapons hit the mark and as far as anyone knows, it will also be 'free to play'.

FALLEN EARTH

http://fallenearth.com/

Impressions: A dark horse, one to be watched, Fallen Earth already sports some impressive visuals along with its highly-customisable models and real world weaponry. How customisable? You can even zip your jacket open or closed.

Hot Topic: Mad Max inspired with deformable terrain and support for the Ageia PhysX card.

UNLEASH THE FURY

www.unleashthefury.com

Impressions: A pure Player vs. Player action-based MMO. The visuals look stunning and the focus on player battles seems to be what the consumers want. Looking like a cross between Exteel and Guild Wars, Unleash The Fury is still a while off so little is known.

Hot Topic: Action-packed Player vs. Player battles with no waiting in queues.

HUXLEY

www.webzen.com/eng/games/huxley/huxley.html

Impressions: A first-person MMO, with heavy emphasis on the action and the teamwork. The massive urban cityscapes and futuristic vehicles make this one interesting, along with the fact that it will be released on the Xbox 360.

Hot Topic: Fast run-and-gun action.

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

www.burningsea.com

Impressions: Incredibly detailed ship models and realistic visuals, along with crews scampering across the deck. This one deals with a detailed pirate world where you do pirate things.
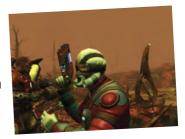
Hot Topic: Realistic water, fanciful romantic styling and ocean-based Player vs. Player.

TABULA RASA

www.playtr.com

Impressions: Richard Garriott's (Ultima) new project, Tabula Rasa attempts to create a vivid, alive world with action, explosions and more. A recent redesign has made it much more appealing.

Hot Topic: Shifting battlefronts and giant alien mechs.

WARHAMMER ONLINE

www.warhammeronline.com

Impressions: The world seems thoughtfully designed with interesting quests and unexpected twists during combat. The development team seem inspired to be working with this license, which has a wealth of history.

Hot Topic: Built from the ground up for Realm vs. Realm warfare.

WIKI

www.webzengames.com/Game/Wiki/default.asp

Impressions: Charming and attractive, Wiki takes its visual cues from Zelda: Windwaker [GC], appearing bright and whimsical.

Hot Topic: All-ages interest.

Naturally, these are only a sampling of the entire MMO line-up that was presented at E3 2006. Many more are on the way and most of them will do battle for your monthly subscription fee.

GAME.DEV

PUZZLING IT OUT

CONSTRUCTING REWARDING AND CHALLENGING PUZZLES FOR YOUR GAMES IS A DIFFICULT TASK. THIS MONTH WE'LL TAKE A LOOK AT VARIOUS STRATEGIES TO DO JUST THAT, USING GOLEM MASTER AS AN EXAMPLE.

PUZZLE DESIGN

KEEPING YOUR PLAYERS INTRIGUED in your game without frustrating them is a fine art. There's a balancing act between making your puzzles too hard and making them so simple that they're unrewarding to play. You need to fine-tune your difficulty progression to keep introducing new elements and strategies to the gameplay without chasing players away, or worse still, bore them to sleep.

One of the key concepts in progression design is the idea of continually providing goals for the player to work towards. Long-term goals give the player a reason to load up the game again and are often provided by story, twists in the plot or saving the universe, and can be compelling when used to keep your player interested in where the game is going. Think of long-term goals as reachable in an hour of play.

Short-term goals should keep the player playing the game at the moment, so it's a good idea to range them over a time period. Have a 30 minute goal, for example finish this level arc to get to the princess, a 10 minute goal (reach the gem of knowing +1), a three minute goal (figure out how to beat this nasty door trap) and a 30 second goal (get this tile over there so that the Golem will turn at the right time).

KEEPING THE PLAYER AND THE MECHANIC IN MIND

Once you have the goals you've laid out for the player, you need to think about their emotional response while they're playing your game. That will help you keep track of which puzzles will fit well with what the player should be experiencing. Ramp up the difficulty slowly while making the levels darker to create tension, then release it by introducing a new element to the game as a reward. Use the players' sense of limitations to force them to experiment with new solving strategies before they hit a really difficult set of puzzles, so that they're a little better prepared.

You also need to understand the play mechanics in your game in order to use them in as many ways as possible to make interesting puzzles. Golem Master, for instance, uses tile sliding as a primary puzzle mechanic. This means that there are many different tile access and positioning problems that can be used in its puzzles. There's a secondary puzzle on top of the tile sliding though: the Golem responding to tiles as it moves around the map. This gives the player reasons to try to position types of tiles in specific spots. We can use this in our puzzle designs in many ways. One obvious advantage is to give the player just enough tiles to allow three different types of sliding tricks, but we leave the actual order of the tricks (and the tiles) up to the player, letting them experiment to find a solution to the secondary puzzle.

This suggests a progression method for Golem Master. Initially we should familiarise the player with the sliding system, making the secondary puzzle rather simple to allow them to learn the various ins and outs of doing things like stacking tiles to make

a previously unreachable location able to stop a tile. Then, once the player is comfortable with tile sliding, we ease off on the sliding difficulty and start ramping up the Golem navigation difficulty. This can be done by upping the number of tiles that are important to the Golem (i.e.: more tiles with arrows on them, instead of ones that can only slide) and making the path through the levels more complex. Finally, once the player is comfortable with only having to solve the secondary puzzle, we can start introducing primary and secondary problems in the same puzzles. The progression methods, once we're composing both systems together, offer a lot of choices. Do we 'reset' one of the puzzle layers (sliding or navigation) each time we raise the other one? Or do we try to keep a smooth progression in terms of both?

Developed stuff, moving!

MEASURING DIFFICULTY

One of the keys to designing a good sequence of puzzles is to have a solid sense of how difficult a problem is for the player. Generally it's a very good idea to have some external measure of 'hardness' instead of relying on your own perception, as you'll often start getting pretty good at your own game and start thinking that puzzles are easy when they're actually really hard for someone who hasn't played as much as you have.

Exactly how you define the tricky concept of 'difficulty' is up to you and depends heavily on the specific game you're trying to build. As long as whatever scale you define is tested against a reasonable number of new players every once in a while, it'll be useful. If we take a look at Golem Master's intended gameplay, we can see that there are a few factors that influence the difficulty of any given puzzle. Firstly we have the number of moves that the sliding section of the puzzle needs to reach a solution. The more moves the harder the puzzle. And secondly we've got the ratio of tiles that mean something to the Golem against the number of obstacles in the puzzle. In this case the two extremes of

A classic reborn

the ratio are harder. If we have few meaningful tiles and many obstacles, calculating the path will be hard, while if we have many meaningful tiles and few obstacles, the actual path becomes complex because we have many possible combinations.

GENERATING PUZZLES

Seeing as we want to have a way of calculating how difficult a puzzle is based on some variables, shouldn't we be able to create ways to generate puzzles automatically? We could just put together an algorithm that takes those values and spits out a different puzzle every time, couldn't we?

The short answer is: yes. Random generation of puzzles and scenarios has been used in many games. The long answer is slightly different and has a lot to do with user satisfaction. Generally, human-made puzzles tend to be more satisfying than generated puzzles. There's often a level of appreciation that your players can pick up for how much personal work actually went into something. That's not to say that a good generator can't make fun puzzles, far from it! It's just that it's very difficult to program a high-quality generator unless you know your game mechanics (and their effects on players) very well. Another important factor is that people love patterns. Programs usually come up with patterns by sheer chance once in a while, but human designers are great at creating or emphasising patterns which players find rewarding.

The best puzzles are usually the result of a designer noticing a specific mechanism that appears in the game and then experimenting with that to try and create as many situations as possible. Playing through puzzles that have been randomly generated can be a really good source of inspiration. Every once in a while you'll see something that would be really great if it were slightly different, and thus another puzzle is born.

Take the example of 'diagonal positioning' in Golem Master. Sometimes you're going to want to slide a tile to a point that's not directly next to an obstacle that could stop the tile, but there's one close by. In that case, it's intuitive to slide a tile against the obstacle, creating a backstop for the original point you wanted a tile to be at.

But what if that point is further from the obstacle? Now you have to stack more tiles against the obstacle to create your backstop - simple. But it's also possible to get a tile to that point using one less tile. You could pull the first tile out of the 'stack' and use that as the final positioned tile. This trick (which we'll call "stacking") can be used over and over again with just two tiles, provided you can always pull the last tile from the stack to reuse it.

A puzzle generator algorithm will scatter obstacles around and use stacking in random directions until a puzzle has been produced. It will take a player a lot of trial and error to find the correct sequence of slides to recreate what the program did. A puzzle created by a human designer, on the other hand, will have some sort of pattern to the slides and stacking directions which the player will appreciate and understand, making them feel smarter and happier with your game.

FINAL MOVES

A puzzle game is only as good as its most frustrating puzzle. If players get too frustrated or stuck on a particular level for too long, they're going to give up and hate your game. Always remember to keep your players in mind when you're building puzzles. Treat them the way you would want to be treated. Fifty good, fun puzzles are much better than 250 puzzles that are too hard or boring. **NAG**

You can teach an old game new tricks

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LIFESTYLE

KUNG FU HUSTLE

Cast: Stephen Chow, Xiaogang Feng, Siu-Lung Leung
Director: Stephen Chow
Genre: Action/Comedy
Rating: 13V

IN A TOWN RULED by the notorious Axe gang, a young criminal hopes to make it big as a mob boss. Meanwhile the gang are in a feud with the residents of a local apartment complex. Soon the criminal is embroiled in a saga involving dancing gangsters, retired kung-fu masters and the world's best killer.

The Movie: Stephen Chow hits the world with another slapstick masterpiece. More polished than Shaolin Soccer, the effects are focused around making the action-sequences ridiculously fantastic. It's arguably the next evolution to wire-stunts, but at the same time the story and production has its tongue in its cheek. It's an action-packed and very funny ride.

The DVD: Subtitles in several languages, English and Chinese audio plus commentary.

WALK THE LINE

Cast: Joaquin Phoenix, Reese Witherspoon
Director: JamesMangold
Genre: Drama
Rating:10

THE STORY OF COUNTRY-WESTERN artist Johnny Cash, one of the icons of America. The legendary singer/songwriter died a few years ago and this is the product of two biographies and working closely with his family, telling the story of the man in black.

The Movie: Joaquin Phoenix plays a convincing and intense Cash, particularly impressive since Phoenix can't actually sing. But it's all his own voice. Reese Witherspoon netted an Oscar for her role as his lover Jean Carter and the movie focuses a lot on their relationship. It's a strong biopic that Music fans will enjoy.

The DVD: Thanks to being an Oscar nominated film, there are lots of extras on the 2 DVD edition, including ten deleted scenes, documentaries on Cash and his career, as well as insights into how

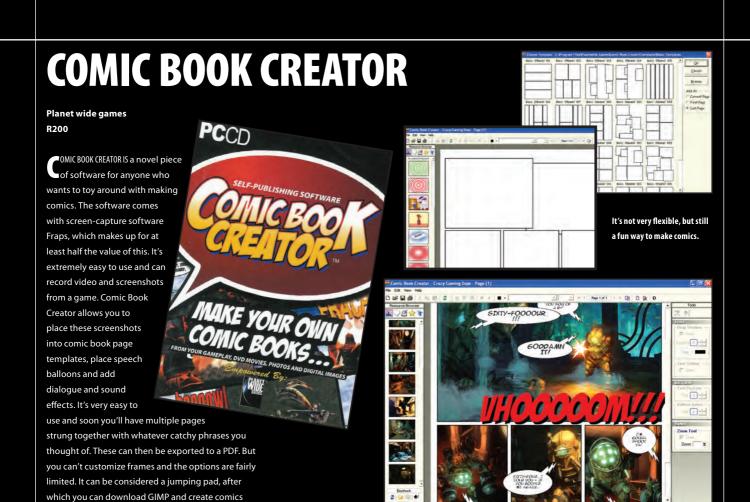Phoenix and Witherspoon worked to portray their characters accurately.

THE TRANSPORTER 2
Genre: Action
Age Rating: 16

Frank Martin is back, this time working as a chauffeur for an important U.S. official. Soon a Columbian drug-lord kidnaps the kid and when Frank is wrongly fingered for the kidnapping, he sets out to sort things out. Not as stylish or interesting as the first movie, this sequel is still fun to watch and rarely misses a beat to add in the action. Unfortunately the action turns too incredible at times, even for a Transporter movie.

Features: Trailer and subtitles.

SAVED!
Genre: Comedy
Rating: 16

A girl attending a Christian school falls pregnant trying to save her gay boyfriend. This forces her to question her dogmatic faith in this dark but cute comedy. It's not religiously offensive, but it does pick a bone with religious zealotry. Donnie Darko and Weeds fans will have fun spotting familiar faces, plus after Party Monster Macaulay Culkin is cool again.

Features: Commentary by the makers and by the two female leads. Bloopers and a making-of documentary cover the bases.

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COMIC BOOK CREATOR

Planet wide games
R200

COMIC BOOK CREATOR IS a novel piece of software for anyone who wants to toy around with making comics. The software comes with screen-capture software Fraps, which makes up for at least half the value of this. It's extremely easy to use and can record video and screenshots from a game. Comic Book Creator allows you to place these screenshots into comic book page templates, place speech balloons and add dialogue and sound effects. It's very easy to use and soon you'll have multiple pages strung together with whatever catchy phrases you thought of. These can then be exported to a PDF. But you can't customize frames and the options are fairly limited. It can be considered a jumping pad, after which you can download GIMP and create comics with more freedom.

It's not very flexible, but still a fun way to make comics.

The Spectre

DC Comics R22.50

CRISPUS ALLEN WAS A detective, or maybe he still is. What he is more than anything else though, is dead. The problem is he's still around. When he was alive he wasn't sure he believed in God, so afterwards, when a spirit came to him and called on him to help do God's work of vengeance, Crispus said no!

Now a year has passed, and Crispus has seen the man who killed him get off scot-free. It seems like a good deal. Join the Spirit and surely you get to seek your revenge on the man who killed you, right?

Apparently not. The Spectre has other ideas for Crispus!

Liberty Meadows

Image R22.50

THIS IS A STRANGE comic book. It's one the guys can take home and show their girlfriends because the story revolves around the staff and anthropomorphic animals of the Liberty Meadows animal sanctuary. However, the Author and artist, Frank Cho, also has a fascination with breasts and sexy women. Of course the strips are really funny too. Cho even manages to take the mickey out of himself as well, periodically appearing as a monkey in his own strip. Blended with extreme sarcasm, these are the kinds of comics your parents never read.

The Last Christmas

Image R22.50

HUMANITY FINALLY DID IT. They dropped the bomb and screwed up the world. We've all seen it before: ravaging bands of mutants and small enclaves of humanity struggling to survive in a desolate world. But at least there is still some goodness in the world, so Santa gets to keep doing his thing. Every Christmas he's off on his sleigh delivering the presents. Then one Christmas Eve, while Santa's off making his deliveries, a band of nomads shows up at the North Pole. What do they find? Well, a bunch of elves and the delectable Mrs Clause. When Santa comes back to the desolation he's not quite the guy he used to be. Especially when he finds out that suicide is not an option.

Human Target: Final Cut

DC Comics R99.95

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT YOU and your dad might have in common. Sgt. Rock has been around since the fifties and ran up to the late eighties. Since then, it has been in hiatus until the 2003 graphic novel, Between Hell & A Hard Place. This spurned Sgt. Rock co-creator Joe Kubert to write and illustrate a 6-issue miniseries that started in January. The art style is actually quite refreshing and the hard (but not Vertigo hard) story reminds of the great World War II movies. The plot and 'Nazis as bad guys' approach seem heavy for its presentation, especially since comics have matured into much darker themes and questions. But fans of the series won't be disappointed, plus Sgt. Rock and Easy Company has a lot of new aspects that will entice new readers.

COMICS GRAPHIC NOVELS SUPPLIED BY OUTER LIMITS [011] 482-3771

OUTER LIMITS

THE RAVEN'S LOFT

I CLONE YOUR MAGIC!

THIS COLUMN IS SUPPOSED to be (mostly!) about gaming forms that don't require a computer (or gambling!). So how is it that this month we're talking about piracy? China, and its thriving piracy industry, that's how! (Even though the Chinese are renowned for their passionate love of gambling, we shan't be discussing that.) But perhaps I should start at the beginning (clichéd, but it is said to work)…

A few weeks ago, a friend called me to let me know that he was looking at some heavily discounted Magic: The Gathering decks at some Chinese shop. Alarm bells should have been going off in my head at this point, but perhaps I had just woken up, or was about to. So I thanked him for letting me know, and asked him to pick a few up for me, which he assured me he would do.

Days passed, as I see this particular friend, on average, on a fortnightly basis. Meanwhile, a colleague of mine at the office invited me to join her for lunch and a brief quest for Magic cards, which I accepted. We ended up at Fourways Mall, searching for a shop that turned out not to exist and, despondently, we asked someone at the information booth whether they knew anywhere else we could go. They directed us to the mall's Ending Man outlet, where we found a box of Mirrodin-block boosters. Upon returning to the office, we discovered that there was something a bit odd about these 'Mirrodin' boosters – the packaging felt somewhat coarser than usual. As it turned out, the differences didn't end there, and the cards themselves were counterfeit.

My advice to fans of this particular collectible card game is to avoid Ending Man stores and the ubiquitous flea-market Chinese shops – it is HIGHLY UNLIKELY that what you buy there will be the real McCoy! Rather, stick to accredited Magic stockists.

The above card is the genuine article, while the one below is fake. Notice how the fake's text is mostly in boldface, contains a spellling mistake and is laid out slightly differently (eg. "Creature - Spirit")

HOW THEY DIFFER
- Here are some characteristics of the fake, 'cloned' cards:
- Booster packs are of thicker plastic, and fit more loosely
- Boxes and boosters tend to have uniform pictures
- The cards are slightly smaller, and feel thicker
- The background printing is slightly off-colour
- Text is usually slightly darker

GET REAL
Here are a few stockists of the genuine product in the Johannesburg area. Lack of space prevents us from providing details for other areas, but contacting the folks at the shops detailed here should yield results.

Outer Limits, Melville: (011) 482-3771
Wizards, The Colony: (011) 880-9252
Cosmic Comics, Blackheath: (011) 476-9640
AnimeWorx, Randburg: (011) 789-8215

GAME OVER

EPILOGUE
CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE

YOU'VE JUST FINISHED READING over a hundred pages of gaming news, reviews, previews and commentary. Or at least, we assume you have. Otherwise, why are you on the back page already? Did you skip forward, just to read this, or was it the comic that led you here to the end first? Whatever the reason for being here, while we have your attention we'd like to let you know a little something: we love hearing from you.

E-mails, letters and comments from our readers remind us that there are people out there who enjoy all the work and time that go into putting this magazine together. So e-mail us, write to us or say hello if you see us – we dig that.
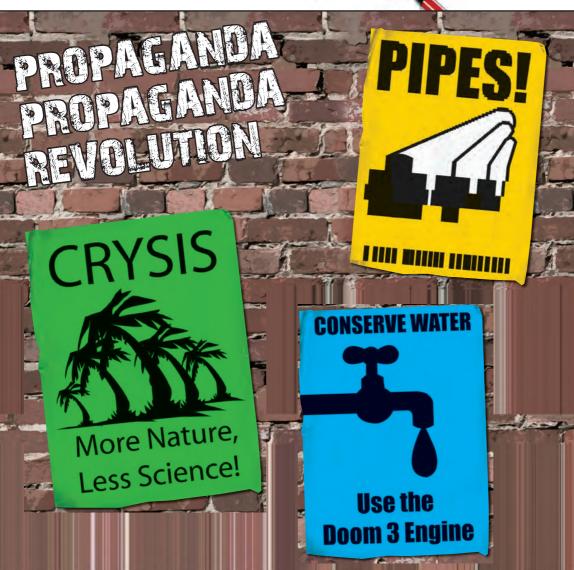
Naturally, we simply cannot always reply to every e-mail, every forum post or every brick with a letter tied to it, thrown through the window. It's not that we get so many and that it would be physically impossible to. No, the reason we can't always stop and converse with those who enjoy what we do is because we're busy doing what we do, which you love so much.

There's no doubt that working to produce something like NAG is a wonderful experience – a never-ending cascade of gaming euphoria that really leaves you feeling good about yourself. The trick, however, is that the production of anything takes time, no matter how much you love doing it. If love could somehow substitute or augment time, to give us more time, we'd spend entire weeks simply answering e-mails. But life, cruel life, doesn't work that way.

It may sound schmaltzy, but it's true. You love NAG, NAG loves you. But for now it unfortunately remains platonic. **NAG**

Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb... Mary had a little lamb, and she killed it.

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